

# Germany: Second order but still groundbreaking?

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## INTRODUCTION

Concurrent to regional-level elections in the state of Bremen and local election in nine out of sixteen states, Germany elected its share of representatives for the ninth legislative term of the European Parliament (EP) on May 26<sup>th</sup>. With 96 seats, Germany contributes the largest number of politicians to the EP. These parliamentarians are elected based on a proportional electoral system and in a single constituency. Plus, for the second time, there is no legal threshold for parties to win seats. This means that, due to the large number of seats available, around 0.6% of the votes could already be enough to win at least one seat. Taken together, these factors lead to high party fragmentation, much higher than in the national or regional parliaments, the majority of which implement a legal threshold. Moreover, it provides a huge incentive for small and micro parties to run in EP elections; in 2014, twenty-five parties competed, fourteen of which won at least one seat.

Traditionally, and quite similarly to other member states, elections to the EP receive much less attention than elections to the national parliament; in terms of campaign intensity, media coverage, public interest or turnout (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010; Giebler and Wüst, 2011; Giebler and Lichteblau, 2016). While this second-order nature also holds true for the 2019 EP elections in Germany, the results might still prove ground-breaking as recent trends – losses for mainstream-centre parties, the rise of the Greens and a stabilisation of right-wing populist success especially in East Germany – converge into very clear patterns.

## INITIAL SITUATION AND ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

For several years, the German party system – once one of the most stable party systems in the world – has undergone significant changes with drastic increases in party fragmentation and electoral volatility. In particular, the centre-right, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and their Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU), and the centre-left, Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) are losing voters in droves, while the Greens, who have recently moderated their positions, have established themselves successfully as an alternative to these older mainstream parties. Since 2013, the rapid rise of the right-wing populist Alternative for Ger-

many (AfD) has brought the German party system in line with typical Western European party systems (Arzheimer 2015), further exacerbating problems for the centre parties and stymieing coalition formation. All these developments seem to be linked to more general societal changes leading to major shifts of political competition and cleavages with more and more focus on socio-cultural and identity-related policy issues (Franzmann et al. forthcoming).

These societal developments are accompanied by major internal challenges for many of the German parties. For example, Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that she would not seek an additional term after 2021, and she gave up party leadership in December 2018, which caused internal power struggles in the CDU. This internal power struggle was further complicated by the fact that the CSU continues to cater more and more to the (populist) right, even after receiving the worst electoral result in a Bavarian state-level election since 1950. The SPD is in even worse shape after breaking their promise not to enter another Grand Coalition and continuing to suffer from leadership changes at the top of the party. Meanwhile, the AfD was hit by several scandals, many of them related to potentially illegal party donations and strong links of some politicians to far-right networks. Lest we think this is a problem only for right and centre parties, the socialist Left was harmed by Sahra Wagenknecht's – one of the party's most important and most visible politicians – efforts to form a left-wing movement similar to the "Yellow Vests" in France. The only parties that have managed to avoid serious internal struggles in recent months are the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

In a situation of political change and internal party struggles, in which other primarily national factors were so important, it would have been surprising had the 2019 elections constituted an exception to the general patterns of second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Even Manfred Weber's (CSU) candidacy as Spitzenkandidaten (with a substantial chance of becoming the President of the European Commission) did not ignite a more intense public debate about European issues.

Looking to the major parties' campaigns, CDU and CSU published a common and rather short electoral manifesto with a pro-European core. Primarily, they proposed to maintain the European Union (EU) as it currently stands – campaigning against redistributive efforts and interdictions from the left as well as against right-wing (populist) challenges. Controlling migration into the EU was a very central topic as well. The SPD, instead campaigned for a fairer tax system for large companies, for more development aid, and for better controls at its external border in order to decrease migration into Europe. The Greens, led by The Greens–European Free Alliance's (GEFA) Spitzenkandidatin Ska Keller, focused on more EU-wide regulations to fight, among other things, climate change and tax evasion. Somewhat similarly, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) campaigned for a common law on migration and asylum, as well as for strengthening the process of drafting a common constitution. At the same time – as expected for a liberal, economy-focused party – they supported open markets as one of the EU's central pillars. The Left meanwhile concentrated on issues like solidarity and more social justice, and linked these issues to ecological challenges. Finally, the AfD gave up their opposition on Germany's membership in the

EU for the duration of the campaign, while at the same time clearly speaking against the creation of any substantive competencies on the supra-national level. Additionally, they denied climate change (or any negative consequences of it) and recognized as the EU's only merit its guarantee of free trade. In a nutshell, all parties campaigned rather close to their ideological core, and low media attention did not encourage much public debate among the parties. The result was, unsurprisingly, a rather underwhelming and unexciting electoral campaign.

However, while the 2019 EP elections may not have sparked a tide of interest in European issues, opinion polls do suggest that the interest in EP elections has substantially increased in comparison to 2014 (infratest dimap, 2019). With the “Fridays for Future” movement picking up speed in Germany, and an hour-long video of YouTube influencer Rezo criticising the CDU in particular for their failures regarding economic inequality and environmental politics garnering more than eleven million views by election day, there seems to be some politicisation going on in the younger generations and beyond.

Especially in the final months before the election, climate crisis, environmental issues, and sustainability became very dominant topics. In May 2017, about 30% of the population stated that environmental issues are one of the most important problems in Germany while it was only 10% at the beginning of the year (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2019). Traditionally, the Greens are associated with these topics and – in the eyes of the population – have high competencies to deal with them, which clearly helped them on election day as many other parties were unable to present convincing ideas on how to deal with these issues.

## RESULTS

While the election to the EP was not central to public discourse – and perhaps not even to all the parties competing – it nevertheless took place in interesting and rather polarised as well as politicised times. All in all, forty-one parties competed in the EP – sixteen parties more than in 2014 and seven more than in the 2017 federal election. The electoral outcomes are presented in Table 1. They are based on the preliminary results published by the Federal Returning Officer (2019). Turnout increased substantially and reached 61.4% – 13.3 percentage points more than in 2014, and the highest turnout since the 1990s. It seems to be indeed the case that politicisation helped mobilise citizens to cast a ballot. Still, significantly fewer people participated than in the federal election 2017 (76.2%) which is typical for second-order elections (Giebler, 2014; Giebler and Wagner, 2015).

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Germany

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	EPP	8,437,093	22.6	23	-7.5	-6
Alliance 90/The Greens (Greens)	G-EFA	7,675,584	20.5	21	+9.8	+10
Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	S&D	5,914,953	15.8	16	-11.4	-11
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	EFD	4,103,453	11.0	11	+3.9	+4
Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU)	EPP	2,354,817	6.3	6	+1.0	+1
The Left (Linke)	GUE-NGL	2,056,010	5.5	5	-1.9	-2
Free Democratic Party (FDP)	ALDE	2,028,353	5.4	5	+2.1	+2
The Party	G-EFA/NI	898,386	2.4	2	+1.8	+1
Free Voters (FW)	ALDE	806,590	2.2	2	+0.7	+1
Human Environment Animal Protection	Other	541,984	1.4	1	+0.2	
Ecological Democratic Party (ÖDP)	G-EFA	370,006	1.0	1	+0.4	
Family Party of Germany	ECR	273,755	0.7	1	+0.0	
Volt	Other	248,824	0.7	1		
Pirate Party Germany	G-EFA	243,363	0.7	1	-0.8	
National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)	NI	101,323	0.3		-0.8	-1
Other		1,334,737	3.6			
<b>Total</b>		<b>37,389,231</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>96</b>		
Turnout (%)			61.4			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>none</i>			

Germany will be represented by fourteen parties in the EP – exactly the same number as in 2014. The pro-European party *Volt* is the only new party winning parliamentary representation – picking up the seat vacated by the radical right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). The NPD lost its seat as its voters moved to the AfD – a trend already observed in other recent elections. Of the major parties, there is only one real winner: The Greens, who nearly doubled their vote and seat shares. Clearly, this is in part driven by the increased salience of the party's core issues. However, the party has also managed to become more attractive for (socio-economically) centrist voters in general and, in comparison to other German parties at this point in time, the party presents itself as rather homogenous and free from internal struggles. While the AfD, the CSU and the FDP also won more votes than in 2014, they lost in comparison to the last federal election. Especially the AfD, which in 2014 mobilised many Eurosceptic voters (Wagner et al. 2015), did not really benefit from their programmatic shift away from European issues and towards topics like immigration and Islam (Giebler et al. 2019).

Without a doubt, the CDU and especially the SPD, traditionally the two largest parties in Germany, suffered heavy defeats. It is quite common that (large) parties in government lose votes in EP elections, and that such losses are the highest in the middle of the national election term (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In fact, when EP elections took place in 2004, right the middle of the national term, losses for the then government (SPD and the Greens) were even more substantial. Nevertheless, the two parties can only be described as the biggest losers of May 26<sup>th</sup>, as their results represent a long progressive trend of de-alignment from the two centre parties. Moreover, it seems that the reasons behind this decline are manifold, ranging from unpopular policy positions, inadequate assignment of salience to certain issues, communication problems and substantive problems of party leadership. To a certain degree, this also applied to the Left – the only smaller party present in the Bundestag which lost votes not only in comparison to the last federal, but also to the 2014 EP election.

Seven small parties managed to gain seats due to the absence of a legal electoral threshold. These parties have vote shares that vary from 0.7% (Pirate Party Germany) to 2.4% (The Party, founded by the editors of a German satirical magazine). Most of these parties managed to increase their vote share, and two of them (The Party and Free Voters) even managed to win an additional seat in comparison to 2014. This might be the clearest sign that, on the one hand, electoral systems indeed influence electoral behaviour and, on the other hand, that EP elections are second-order elections: about 13% of the voters would have been left without parliamentary representation if the 5% threshold used at the federal level would have been applied.

Finally, there are two interesting features at the level of the electorate, one concerning age and one territorial. The Greens are the favourite party among voters younger than 60 (roughly 25%), but only 13% of citizens older than 60 voted for them. The CDU, CSU and SPD are more popular among the older generations – as is the AfD. This trend is not new, but it has never been so pronounced.. Secondly, while the AfD did not perform that well overall – or, at least, not as well to justify the populist tide rhetoric so often used in public discourse (and especially by the media)

– they won the most votes in two states in East Germany, and are close or above 20% in all East German states except Berlin. In contrast, the AfD only won more than 10% of the votes in one West German state (Baden-Württemberg). The pattern is inverted for the Greens, which do much better in West Germany.

#### CONCLUSION

The EP election provided some very interesting insights into the ongoing upheaval of the German political sphere. First of all, turnout increased significantly, which is a good sign for democracy and probably also some indication that EP elections, or at least, international issues, bear some relevance to voters. However, the election was primarily influenced by ecological issues – whose importance is obviously not limited to the European level – which speaks in favour of a continuing substantive impact of the national arena on citizens' party choice.

As interesting as these results are, they are not surprising. The downwards trend of the CDU and SPD, as well as the all-time high of the Greens, has been foreseeable when looking to public opinion trends since 2017. The AfD did not strengthen in comparison to the last federal election but has nevertheless stabilized its vote share and is building up strongholds in East Germany.

This election was another clear indication that the German party system, as well as parties' attachments to specific societal groups, is changing. As the new patterns abovementioned have never before been so prominent, this election might still be characterised as second order but is also, to a certain degree, ground-breaking. Parties will have to react to these developments, and Germans will have to get used to much higher party fragmentation and rather broader ideological coalitions on different political levels. With Angela Merkel no longer available for another chancellorship, the 2021 federal election has clear potential to not only produce interesting and surprising results, but also results with far-reaching consequences.

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