

European Greens surge as voters abandon old parties over climate



A young protester holds a poster that reads “no coal, no nuclear power, green electricity only” during a Fridays for Future demonstration for urgent action on climate change in Berlin last week. (John MacDougall/AFP/Getty Images)

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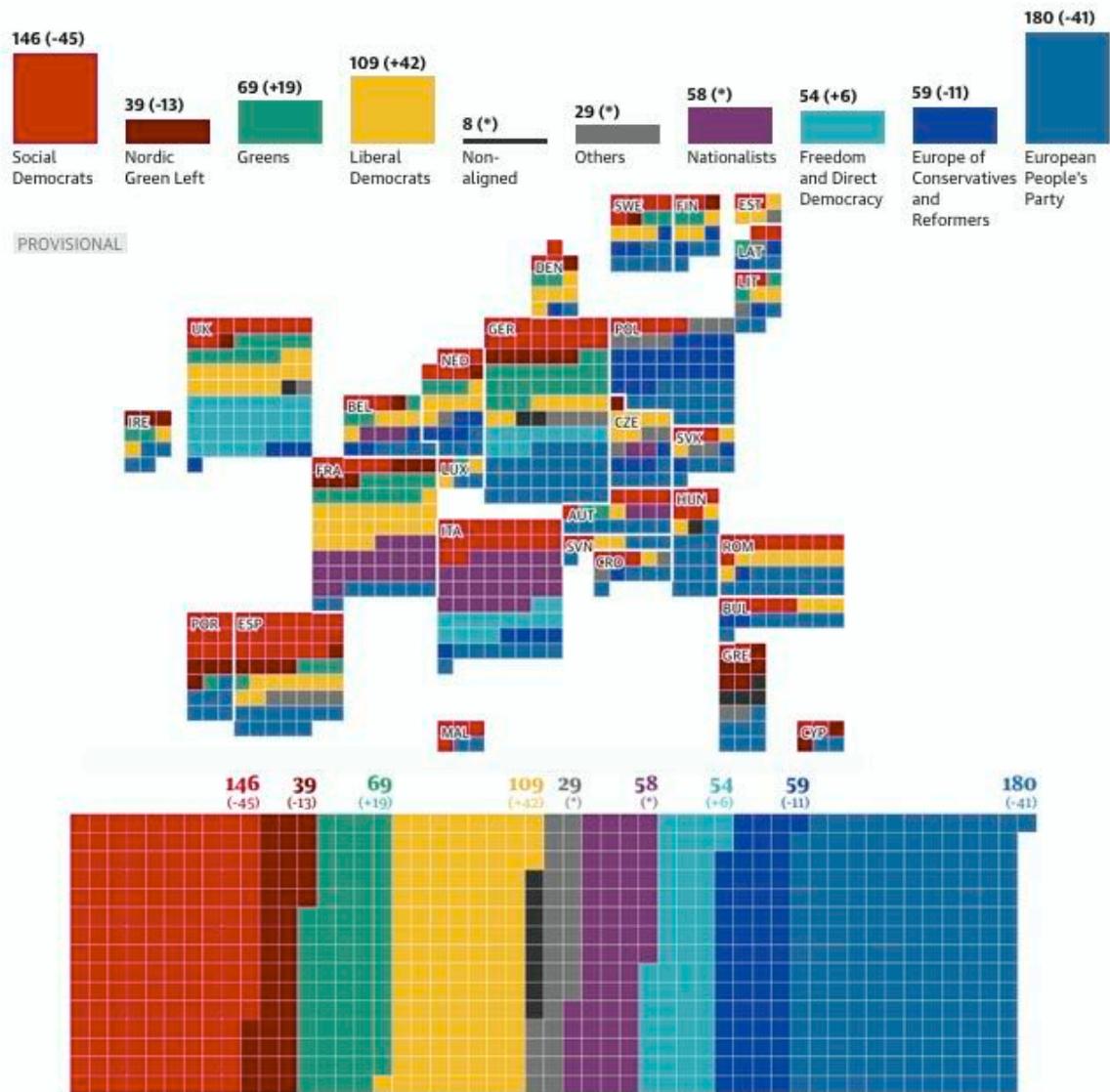
BRUSSELS — European Green parties on Monday were cheering E.U. elections that vaulted them into a kingmaking position of power, as voters abandoned

traditional political parties in favor of climate-focused activists in a green wave that swept several countries.

The results propelled the Greens into second place in Germany and third place in France and elsewhere, amid a surge in excitement from young voters who faulted old-school parties for ignoring their concerns about the environment and offering few alternatives for a generation beset by economic pain following the global financial crisis.

In an election for the European Parliament in which far-right, anti-immigration buccaneers also gained modestly to post [their best-ever result](#), the good showing for the Greens may have the bigger impact on policy. The center-left and center-right parties that long jointly ruled the parliament have lost their majority, meaning they will need to depend on Greens and other centrists to advance their agenda.

The far right, meanwhile, captured about a quarter of the seats, up from a fifth — enough to entrench their angry voices of protest and [cause trouble in the legislature](#), but not enough to actually enact an agenda.



“This is confirmation for us that the topics we’ve been working on for years are the topics that matter to the public in their everyday life and for the future of their children,” said Sergey Lagodinsky, a newly elected Green member of the European Parliament from Germany. “We had times when we wondered: Is this a fringe agenda? Now we know it’s not. It’s the mainstream agenda.”

Many Green parties in Europe have evolved into

disciplined political machines with an agenda that extends far beyond the environment.



Swedish Green Party (Miljöpartiet) candidate Alice Bah Kuhnke, center, and Per Bolund, right, minister for financial markets and housing, applaud at the party's election night watch party in Stockholm on Sunday. (TT News Agency/Reuters)

And they have been particularly successful at capturing energy from young voters. Fridays for Future, a global movement of students who [skip school to protest climate inaction](#), has been active in Europe for months, inspired by a 16-year-old Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, who has become an influential activist.

“The new generation has been re-politicized,” Lagodinsky said. “We thought about these young people as people who only stare at their screens. But they can walk the streets. And that has an impact on their parents and grandparents.”

In some countries, including in Germany, Greens have served in government. But they had never achieved such widespread gains until Sunday’s elections. To some, the result felt like a Green ticket into the European establishment. The party gained 2 percentage points, winning 9 percent of the 751-seat legislature. Although the overall gain was modest — and in Europe’s south and east, they made little progress — they outperformed in several of Europe’s biggest and most influential countries.

“They’ve become mainstream. They have matured enormously. They’re much more disciplined,” said Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society European Policy Institute, a think tank.

Their appeal to voters goes beyond the environment, she said, after many center-left leaders offered the same mix

of austerity-driven fixes for the 2008 economic crisis as that of their center-right rivals.

“Neoliberalism has triumphed in economic policy, with both the center-right and center-left adopting it. And then the economic crisis came along, and the left did not benefit from that,” Grabbe said. “The left did not provide alternatives.”

Green issues have reverberated outward: Leaders from other parties, seeing a Green success bubbling in opinion polls, emphasized climate issues in the campaign.

“Green is not the sole property of the Green Party,” Frans Timmermans, a senior Dutch politician who was the European center-left coalition’s lead candidate, said at a debate last month. He said other political parties — notably his own — were also focusing on the environment.

That will benefit the Greens. As they sweep into Parliament, they will have to team up with others to enact their agenda, as they have already with success inside individual countries.

“In an increasing number of countries, we’re a real player, a real polar force now, and we want to translate that to the European level,” Reinhard Bütikofer, a longtime German Green lawmaker, told an after-election event on Monday.

The Green wave was most pronounced in Germany, where the party has long been a potent political player — even serving for seven years as the junior partner in a coalition government in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

But it had never enjoyed a night like Sunday, when it vaulted into second place nationwide with nearly 21 percent of the vote. The surge for the Greens was mirrored by a collapse for the Social Democrats, traditionally the dominant party on the left of German politics but perhaps now supplanted.

The result followed a string of Green successes in German state elections and reflected a surge in the polls that dates back nearly a year as voters registered their unhappiness with the so-called “grand coalition” between Angela Merkel’s conservative Christian Democrats and the center-left Social Democrats.

But more than a protest vote, Green strength also rests on deep concern in Germany about the state of the planet. German voters told pollsters that the environment was their top concern going into the vote, and that was apparent in the outcome.

Exit polls in Germany showed the Greens to be the overwhelming top choice for young voters and for first-time voters. The party also did especially well in cities, taking voters from the center-left and center-right parties.



Annalena Baerbock, co-leader of the Greens, and a top candidate, Sven Giegold, celebrate in Berlin following the European Parliament election. (Tobias Schwarz/AFP/Getty Images)

Leaders of those two parties acknowledged after the vote that they had been too passive in responding to voter concern about the climate, and they promised to do better. The Greens in Germany have pushed for aggressive action to curb climate change, including an earlier-than-planned phaseout of coal power.

Jürgen Falter, an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Mainz, said the onus is now on mainstream parties to show they take the issue seriously. But that approach may have its limits.

“Voters tend to choose the original and not the party that only discusses the issue after many defeats,” Falter said.

In a reflection of just how much the Greens are steering the debate in Germany, far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) leader Alexander Gauland declared that the party was now “our main enemy.”

The AfD, which denies the science behind man-made climate change, had a disappointing night on Sunday, failing to match its performance in the 2017 federal elections.

As in Germany, France saw a humiliating loss for the center-left but surprising gains for the Greens. They came in third place, with approximately 13.5 percent of the vote. The Socialists, by contrast, won only 6.2 percent.

Although the Greens also placed third in 2009, winning 16.3 percent of the vote then, Sunday's victory came in the context of the near-total flatlining of the older political movements that dominated France for decades.

In France as elsewhere, the left seems not to have died but merely to have changed form. To the extent that a muscular leftist movement exists, it is now green.

“The Greens represent the only project of the future,” French Greens leader Yannick Jadot said Monday on French television.

Climate change, said an editorial in France's Liberation newspaper, “has become the principal criteria of judging political action in the European Union.”

European elections: triumphant Greens demand more radical climate action

Green politicians to push agenda urging climate action, social justice and civil liberties

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The German Green MEP Sven Giegold, second from right, says the party will put climate policy 'front and centre'. Photograph: Felipe Trueba/EPA

Europe's Greens, **big winners** in Sunday's European elections, will use their newfound leverage in a fractured parliament to push an agenda of urgent climate action, social justice and civil liberties, the movement's leaders say.

"This was a great outcome for us – but we now also have a great responsibility, because voters have given us their trust," Bas Eickhout, a Dutch MEP and the Greens' co-lead candidate for commission president, told the Guardian.

"Our voters, **especially the younger generation**, for many of whom we are now their first choice, are deeply concerned about the climate crisis, and they are

pro-European – but they feel the EU is not delivering. They want us to change the course of Europe.”

Riding a surge of public concern over the climate crisis, Greens achieved double-digit scores in several countries, finishing second in **Germany** – where they doubled their previous score – and Finland and third in Luxembourg and France.

With their tally of MEPs surging to 70 from 51 in the last parliament, the Greens group will have roughly the same clout in the 751-seat assembly as the far-right populists led by Italy’s interior minister, Matteo Salvini – and a much better chance of using it.

The parliament’s shrinking **centre-right and centre-left groups** lost their longstanding joint majority in the election, meaning that along with liberal MEPs, Greens could prove critical to achieving broad pro-EU majorities to pass European legislation.

The big parties are certainly ready to talk. Manfred Weber, the conservative European People’s party’s lead candidate for commission president, said on Monday that the Greens were clearly “a possible partner. We should sit down together and draft a mandate for the next five years.”



Ska Keller, co-president of the Greens/EFA group, speaks as election results are announced on Monday.
Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

But the Greens will have a price. “We will need to see much more serious climate action, a real change of attitude: a price on CO₂, properly tackling aviation, the greening of agriculture,” Eickhout said.

Under the 2015 Paris deal to limit global warming to well below 2C above pre-industrial levels, the 28-nation EU has pledged by 2030 to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% below the levels in 1990.

But scientists and activists say Europe and all other major economies must sharply raise their ambitions. The UN Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change warned in October that warming is currently on track towards a **catastrophic 3C or 4C rise**.

“We will also want real progress on social protection and reducing inequality in Europe,” Eickhout added. “And we will demand far more vigorous action on the rule of law – no more playing politics. So those are the topics. We’ll talk to all who are interested in addressing them.”

Sven Giegold, a senior German MEP, confirmed the party would “insist on negotiating substance first. We aim to negotiate a pro-EU agenda in which climate change policy is front and centre – and no longer just symbolic, but concrete.”

Any cross-party agreement with Green backing would also need to include an EU policy on investment and social cohesion, Giegold said, plus an absolute commitment to tackling civil rights backsliding in EU states including Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Malta.

“We think these election results give us a higher legitimacy to make these demands,” Giegold said. “Parliament now needs to have the time to sit down and discuss all this. We need to see more EU democracy come from this, not less.”

Philippe Lamberts, a Belgian Green MEP and leader of the Greens’ group in the European parliament, also warned that the party would not enter into alliances unless they contain concrete measures. “Without verifiable change for EU citizens, we will not go there,” he said.

The Green’s strong performance on Sunday has already prompted centre-right and centre-left parties around Europe to promise they have heard the call for

more urgent climate action and would heed it.

France's prime minister, Édouard Philippe, acknowledged the "message about the ecological emergency", Markus Söder, who heads Merkel's Bavarian sister-party, the CSU, said the Greens were now its main competitor, and Udo Bullmann, leader of the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (SPD) in the European parliament, said it had underestimated climate change as an issue.

"It's a very clear message from the public that they want us to do more," said Leo Varadkar, the prime minister of Ireland, where a **Green party** candidate finished first in Dublin with 23% of the vote.

National Green leaders were delighted. "Voters have sent a clear signal that they want the environment at the heart of politics," said Yannick Jadot, leader of the Europe Ecologie-Les Verts party in France. "The environment cannot just be a promise you make before elections," he said.

Britain's Greens, boosted partly by their clear-anti-Brexit stance, **beat the ruling Conservatives into fifth place** with a score of 12.5%. The party's sole Westminster MP, Caroline Lucas, welcomed a "response to the accelerating climate crisis that was the same in the UK and right across Europe."

Giegold described the German party's performance as "a Sunday for Future" – a nod to the **Fridays for Future school strikes** led by the 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

The Green wave was not Europe-wide, however. Green parties won only a couple of seats in central Europe and none in eastern Europe, where there are few strong green parties and environmental concerns are usually taken up by other liberal parties.

In southern Europe, Portugal's People-Animals-Nature (Pan) party won its first European parliament seat, but the breakthrough was not replicated across the border in Spain, where Green parties have struggled to make headway on their own.