

What's in for the Greens in the 2019 European elections?

15. February 2019 by [Tobias Gerhard Schminke](#)

It is less than 100 days until the European elections kicks off in the first EU member state: the Netherlands will be heading to the polls on Thursday, 23 May, with the remaining countries to follow until Sunday, 26 May. After this, we will know how the 450 million eligible EU voters have decided (not) to vote.

While there is much uncertainty about the outcome, it will surely be a historic election for Europeans with tectonic shifts in voting behaviour. But what is in store for the Green parties in Europe? Are we going to see a 'Green surge' like in the autumn elections of 2018 in Bavaria, Belgium and Luxembourg? And which countries and which kind of voters will turn to the Greens? The following analysis will answer these questions.

The [Greens/EFA group](#) hosts all environmentalists in the European Parliament but is far from just grass-green. In fact, it is a colourful group, including members of the transnational European Green Party; several, mostly progressive, regionalist parties organized in the transnational [European Free Alliance Party](#); and other national parties not affiliated with either europarty – the Lithuanian farmers party LVŽS and the German Pirate Party, to name just a few. The Greens/EFA, which is one of nine European Parliament groups, currently holds 51 out of 751 seats in the EU legislature.

Because three major central variables for the prediction of the election result are uncertain, different scenarios for the outcome of May's vote are reasonable to consider. The first major uncertainty is whether the United Kingdom will take part in the elections. The legal assessments on participation of the UK in the elections in case of a delay of Brexit are contradictory. Some scholars argue that the UK must participate in the vote, others disagree. Only a Brexit before elections day would bring the certainty that the UK voters have no say in Brussels and Strasbourg after May 2019. The seat-share of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, however, would [remain between six to seven per cent](#), no matter whether the United Kingdom leaves the European Union or not because the Greens/EFA group members in the UK have a similar vote share to the EU average.

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Another uncertainty in the upcoming elections is the potential rearrangement of the European Parliament groups, which will largely determine how national election promises are put into

practice on the transnational level. Established groups may disappear, merge, split, or remain intact. This is especially true for the groups on the right and in the centre. The Greens/EFA group will largely remain unaffected by this phenomenon. There has been some [speculation of a unification of Greens/EFA, ALDE, S&D, and EPP Members](#) of the EU Parliament (MEPs) to a large eurofederalist Macron-led group in the European Parliament, but it is more likely that the Greens will remain independent after the election given the ideological differences with liberal-conservative or even liberal parties. The Pirate Party, which has been part of the Greens/EFA group since its first appearance in Brussels after the 2009 election, has indicated that it will leave it up to its individual MEPs which EU Parliament group they join. The Pirate Party are currently [projected to get four to five MEPs](#). As the Greens/EFA group continues to exist and has no withdrawals of national parties to fear other than a few Pirate Party members, the uncertainty of rearrangements of groups in the European Parliament will not affect the Greens/EFA group to the same degree as other groups.

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Another uncertainty, relevant for the time after the actual elections, is the Spitzenkandidaten process. The heads of state of government may accept the Spitzenkandidaten system for the elections of the Presidency of the European Commission in line with the Jauregui report; but there is the potential for the Spitzenkandidaten-sceptics around French President Emmanuel Macron (LREM-ALDE) manage to block it. The European Green Party Spitzenkandidaten, Ska Keller and Bas Eickhout, are certainly the faces of the Greens for the European elections campaigns across the continent. But the chances that they will be able to find a majority in the European Parliament against Manfred Weber (EPP) or Frans Timmermans (PES) are extremely slim. While there are talks between centre-left S&D, liberal ALDE, and Greens/EFA members about forming a coalition against Manfred Weber's centre-right EPP, it needs to be acknowledged that the S&D-ALDE-Greens/EFA marriage is projected to encompass only 278 out of 705 Parliament seats and would, therefore, fall short of a majority.

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As neither the group reshuffling, the Spitzenkandidaten process, nor Brexit significantly affect the Greens/EFA group's election experience – what is the most likely outcome for the Greens in the European Parliament?

At the beginning of this month, [Europe Elects projected](#) that the centre-right EPP and the centre-left S&D group will suffer the largest losses. Their combined share of seats in the EU Parliament will be reduced from the current 54% to 43%. At this point, it looks like the liberal ALDE of Emmanuel Macron and Guy Verhofstadt and the right-wing ENF group of Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen will gain more seats than they have in the current parliament, even though it is important to emphasize that they are still behind EPP and S&D. ALDE would currently get around 14% (+5 on comparison to the current Parliament composition) of the seats in the European Parliament, the ENF group would get around 9% (+4) of the seats. Albeit, if the ENF merged with other right-wing groups, they could easily overtake ALDE or even the S&D group and become the second largest force in the EU Parliament with up to 27 percent of the seats. The other groups will remain stable with around 9% (=) for the national-conservative ECR group, 8% (+1) for the left-wing GUE/NGL group, 7% (+1) for the populist EFDD group, and another 7% (+1) for the smallest group Greens/EFA.

The marginal growth of only 1 percentage point compared to 2014 may surprise those who followed remember the autumn 2018 with elections in Bavaria, Luxembourg and Belgium, after which several media described the shifts in voting behaviour as ‘Green surge’, speculating that the Greens could soon become the major force on the European centre-left. The US-UK news magazine The Week, for example, asked: “[What is behind the Green surge in Europe?](#)”. The reason for this misconception of an exceptionally strong Green vote across the continent is threefold.

Firstly, the recent ‘green surge’ is confined to countries of North-Western Europe. This was largely ignored in the media in 2018. A majority of Green parties across the EU do not enjoy major gains compared to the 2014 elections result. Luxembourg, Germany, and Belgium do not reflect the situation of relatively weak Green parties in Eastern Europe, Ireland, and Greece. In fact, the Europe Elects projection from the beginning of this month points out that the Greens do not only gain votes in Western Europe and Germany, but also would lose a significant share of votes compared to 2014 in Sweden, Austria, and Hungary if there was a European elections held today.

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Secondly, the Green parties just recovered in various countries from a crisis in voter support, which occurred after the last European elections in 2014 and did not rise to historic highs as suggested by different influential media. [While the Greens/EFA group reached 50 seats in the](#)

[2014 election, this number was projected to drop to 23 seats in May 2017 and then grew back to 48 seats projected at the beginning of 2019.](#) Therefore, the 'surge' in voter support in recent months was more of a hidden revival of the 2014 voter support. As the media largely dismissed a historization of the electoral data, the image of a transnational Green surge was publicized especially in German and Western European media. The drop and recovery in the projected vote were also reflected in regional and national polls and election results. In the 2017 election, for example, the Greens in Austria failed to enter the national parliament for the first time since the 1980s but have now recovered back to 8%. The failure in 2017 happened just after a historically high EU election result of 15% in 2014. The Greens in France were largely not even mentioned in polls before recovering to their 2014 level over the course of 2018. The separatist parties of Greens/EFA in Spain also perform significantly stronger in more recent European Parliament polls than in polls for the national level in the summer, but only marginally better than the result they achieved in the 2014 European elections.

Another reason for the marginal growth compared to the 2014 elections in terms of seats is the strong growth in more populous countries like Germany or Belgium, while the Greens lose votes in less populous countries like Austria or Hungary. Due to the disproportional electoral system and the seat distribution of the European Parliament, gains in votes in more populous countries are not reflected to the same degree as losses of votes in smaller countries. Hence, the German gains are not as much reflected in the Parliament as the 'green surge' on the national level suggests.

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After this historization of the Green vote and the demystification of the so called 'Green surge', it is now interesting to find out more about where the Green votes in Europe currently stem from. Half of the total votes for national parties in the Greens/EFA group currently originate from Germany, as shown in the Europe Elects projection. Thus, the result of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen will largely determine whether the European Greens will be a winner or loser in the May elections. Other important countries to watch out for are the Netherlands and France. Another fifth of the Green vote comes from these countries. Moreover, around 10% of the Greens/EFA vote comes from Spain. Most of the voters here, however, support parties with a progressive regionalist political focus instead of an environmentalist one. The vote share for the national member parties of the Greens/EFA group is the highest in Luxembourg (22%, including 6% for the Pirate Party), in Germany (17%), and in Finland (14%). In Lithuania, the more socially conservative Farmers Party LVŽS, which is also part of the Greens/EFA group but

not the European Greens Party, reaches 24%.

It becomes clear that the Green vote is especially weak in countries of the former 'Eastern bloc', which remains structurally more conservative than the rest of Europe. The Green vote is especially high in urban centres and among young people with academic degrees. The average Green voter in Europe has ~~mostly~~ a higher income than most of his or her peers.

The vote for Green parties in European elections is highly correlated with the topics deemed most important by voters. If climate, environment, or energy-related issues rank high in the electoral conscience, Green parties tend to perform better. While climate change is prioritized by voters more than ever, it remains in the shadow of other dominant issues in the public discourse. Only [16% of EU voters name climate](#) change as first or second most important issue the EU is facing ahead of the European elections. In most member states which joined the European Union in 2004 or later, this value even drops below 10 percent. Only in Sweden a plurality of 46% of voters name climate change as the most or second most important issue ahead of the European elections. As the priority issues named by EU voters remain to be immigration (40%), terrorism (20%), and the public finances of EU member states (19%), it will remain difficult for the Greens to substantially improve their 2014 election result – especially if their electoral base remains confined to the young urban academic voter.