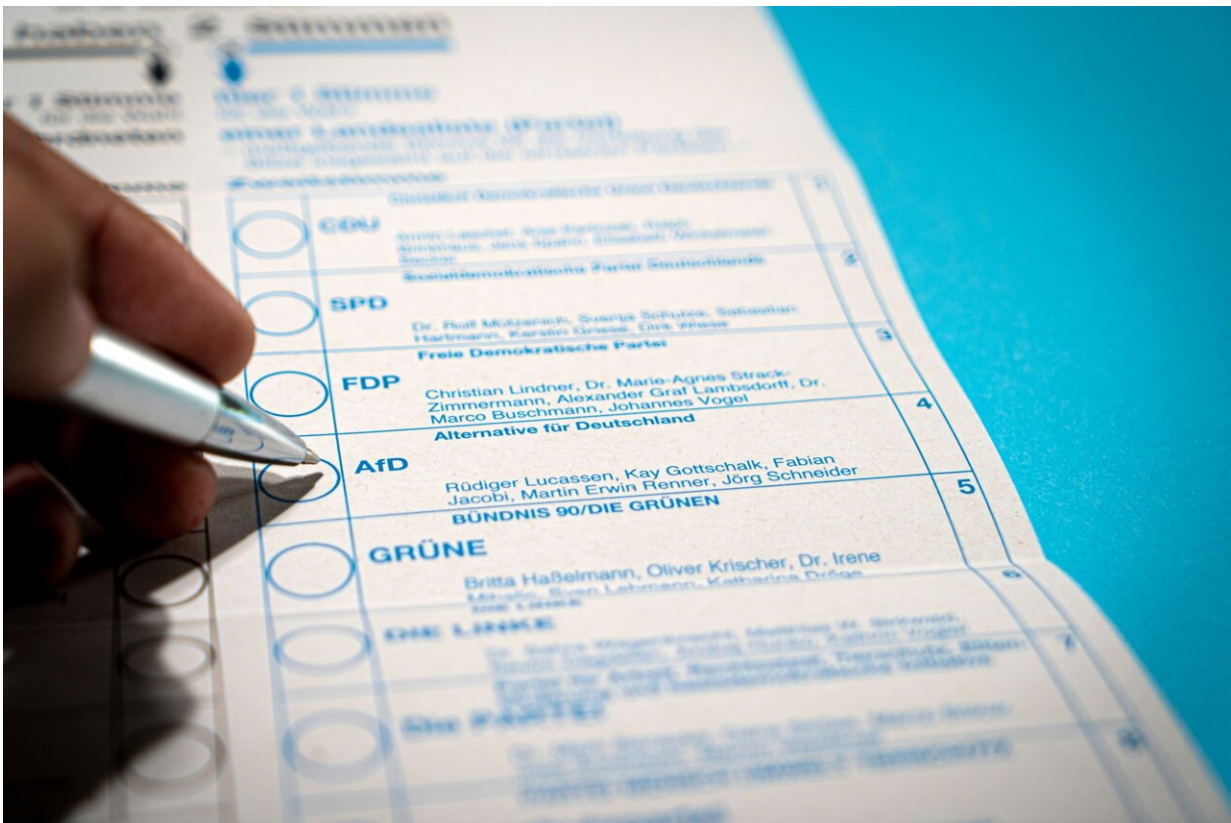


# Why are Europeans—including the young—being pushed to the far right?

June 14 2024, by Matt Fitzpatrick



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In Europe, the slogan "never again fascism" is one that still resonates. The death and destruction wrought by hyper-nationalist, authoritarian states in the first half of the 20th century still haunts the nightmares of

successive generations.

But, as the recent [European Union elections](#) show, the fear of the far right is slipping. The political logic of earlier decades no longer holds in some quarters, and far-right parties are making gains across Europe, as their strategy of electoral engagement continues to pay off.

Views that would have ended political careers in Europe a generation ago are now being rewarded with electoral success. Despite the lead candidate of the German far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party declaring that members of the Nazi SS were [not necessarily criminals](#), his party climbed 5% higher to outpoll all of the parties in [Germany's ruling coalition](#) and gain six new seats in the European parliament.

The AfD also performed shockingly well in [local elections](#) that coincided with the European vote. With important elections coming up in the eastern states of Germany, it remains an open question whether the taboo forbidding collaboration with the far right will endure [another electoral surge](#) by the AfD.

Most breathtaking was the vote in France. Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (previously National Front) smashed President Emmanuel Macron's brittle coalition of center-right parties. The result prompted the president to call a snap election, in what [one commentator](#) has called "one of the wildest gambles in modern French history."

Macron's call for all democratic parties to unite against the far right has already failed. One prominent center-right politician, [Éric Ciotti](#), declared his conservative Republican party (the party of Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy) would join National Rally in a coalition. This has set off what [has been called](#) "the wildest 72 hours in French politics" in a generation.

Whether or not the Republican party joins National Rally in this electoral cycle, an important taboo preventing democratic parties from co-operating with Le Pen has been irrevocably broken. It seems clear that, far from denying National Rally a domestic victory, Macron has created a situation in which--if last weekend's vote is repeated--he will have handed them the "[keys of power](#)".

If Macron hopes this period will [discredit National Rally](#) before Le Pen can take the prize of the presidency, he should take a look at [Italy](#) and elsewhere in [Europe](#), where a period of government has normalized rather than discredited the far right.

In the EU election, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni steered her Brothers of Italy party to first place, confirming her [leading position](#) among the European right. While their vote was weaker than their historic highs, the bulwark parties of right-wing illiberalism in Hungary (Fidesz) and Poland (Law and Justice Party) also remain extremely powerful.

Even outside the EU, in Britain, Nigel Farage's populist far-right [Reform](#) party has overtaken the Tories in polling for the first time. Many will be watching their result in the July 4 election with a mixture of interest and dread.

Only in [Nordic countries](#) did a clear turn away from the far right eventuate. In [Sweden](#), the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Greens together managed to secure almost 50% of the vote.

## **Youth against fascism? Not in 2024**

Is this rightward lurch a symptom of a generational shift towards anti-democratic, racist values in young voters? The [claim](#) has been repeatedly made, but are the [young voters](#) of Europe to blame for the rise of the

right?

In Germany, at least, the picture is more complex. According to [Tim Gensheimer](#), a German researcher studying youth voting patterns, talk of a generational swing misses the point that voters between 16 and 24 were just as likely to vote left as right of center. Generational generalizations, he insists, overlook the fact that young people are sharply divided on political matters. This is despite sharing a sense of disillusionment with major parties whose promises of a better environment, lower costs of living and a secure future have amounted to nothing.

Nonetheless, something has clearly changed.

A close look at youth voting in Germany shows the real disaster was for the [Greens](#). They promised much in the last election and have delivered little since, leading to the loss of a massive 23% in their youth vote.

By comparison, the AfD and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) picked up an additional 11% and 5% of young people's votes respectively. Although the social-democratic SPD vote stayed relatively steady among young people, it remains perilously low.

Further to the left, the Linke lost ground among youth voters in what was a terrible election for them. However, 6% of voters under 24 gravitated to the new populist [Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht](#)—a paleo-leftist outgrowth of the Linke stripped of its progressive green, gender and migration politics and deeply skeptical about military support for Ukraine.

Instead of voting as a group for the far right, young Germans voted more for micro-parties than any established party. In terms of age, the [group most likely to vote for the AfD](#) were those in the 35-44 age group, particularly men who felt their economic position was precarious.

Far more obvious than any age divide, however, was Germany's east-west divide, with the AfD polling first in all ex-East German states. Even this, however, is not the whole story, with a north-south divide also emerging. The AfD polled second to the CDU in most parts of the [southern states](#) of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, while in the north-west it was most often the SPD in second position.

The story regarding young people was much the same in France, where the youth vote for the Greens and centrist parties collapsed, and the share of their votes to the outer left [grew modestly](#). In comparison to other age groups, [young people](#) in France remained more likely to vote left of center.

Nonetheless, it is clear many young French voters also took part in the broader political migration to the far right, in part thanks to the youthful star power of their leading candidate, Jordan Bardella. Through his renewal of the party's image, [32% of voters](#) aged between 18 and 34 felt able to vote for National Rally. Macron's candidate managed a paltry 5%.

Elsewhere, Spain too saw a noticeable rise in the influence of the far right, with [Vox](#) collecting two more seats on the back of its anti-migrant, anti-Islam and anti-gender-politics platform. Vox has proved popular among [young men](#), attracted by its blend of old Francoist values, like anti-liberal nationalism and ostensibly traditional family values, with [newer forms](#) of anti-migrant sentiment and climate-change denialism.

## **Why did the far right attract so many young people?**

For some pundits, the answer lies with the parties' tech-savvy approach, which has built up a colossal presence on [Tiktok](#). To be sure, the use of social media to spread anti-migrant rhetoric and white supremacist idealizations of the "mother-father-child" family, as well as far-right

talking points on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has clearly made inroads among a young audience whose main contact with the news comes through scrolling.

However, this overlooks that young Europeans have been screaming into the void for several elections now. They have been searching for a political home that offers them some hope against a cost-of-living crisis, unaffordable housing, a collapsing ecosystem and perpetual warfare.

If, for the most part, the youth [vote](#) remains anti-status quo, this is because the trajectory of established parties appears to offer little to anyone below the age of 25. A well-founded pessimism regarding the capacity of established politics to solve real, structural problems has offered fertile soil for far-right parties peddling dangerously false solutions.

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