

**MEMO** Published June 20, 2024 • 7 minute read

# EU Election: Short-Term Relief, but Long-Term Threat from the Far Right



*Lindsey Walter, Director of International Policy, Climate and Energy Program, Josh Freed, Senior Vice President for the Climate and Energy Program, Kelsey Paulding, EU Government Affairs Director, Carbon Free Europe*

Beware of declarations that the recent European parliamentary elections offered a clear verdict on the continent's politics. It was neither the endorsement of the far-right that many feared nor the validation of the status quo that would make governing easy for the next five years. The European People's Party (EPP), which leads the current EU governing coalition and is the home of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, remains in power. The agenda enacted over the past five years will remain in place. The results, however, are a cautionary tale. Policymakers and NGOs must quickly adapt to a future that could prove to be even more unstable than today's economic and political turmoil.

Europe did dodge the bullet of a far-right sweep of the parliamentary elections. Voters across the Nordic countries, in much of Central and Eastern Europe, and on the Iberian peninsula backed mainstream parties. The news, however, was different in Europe's three most populous and economically powerful countries, Germany, France, and Italy. There, far-right nationalist parties continued their march into the mainstream, offering a much more complex scenario for the future of Europe and the fate of clean energy and climate policy.

The EU cannot maintain the status quo of how climate policy is formulated and communicated to voters. These policies, and how they are discussed, are alienating large groups of Europeans who feel left behind and disenfranchised. This is being exacerbated by populist extremists on both ideological fringes, particularly on the far-right. The question now is whether governments, political institutions, and NGO communities that have created Europe's climate and clean energy agenda can adapt quickly enough to reassure Europeans and rebuff the far-right where it remains strong or is growing.

## **The Implications for the Next EU Parliament and Legislative Agenda**

The conclusion of the European parliamentary election is only the start of the process of determining the next EU political leadership and ruling majority. National delegations will now enter into negotiations to form the European political groups—large groupings of cross-national political families. While these negotiations are ongoing, the center-right EPP, which has secured the largest number of seats in parliament, is expected to solidify the ongoing majority coalition with the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and classic liberal Renew Europe. The far-right nationalist ID Party, and unaffiliated nationalist parties like Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), will likely be excluded from the next government, though the European Conservative and Reformists (ECR) group may align with the EPP's majority position on some issues. This balance of power in the Parliament will also determine the political leadership in other key EU institutions, including the appointment of the next European Commission President.

However the next EU government emerges, we expect the EU Parliament and Commission to follow only a slightly more center-right policy agenda than the current status quo. Current European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who has been in office since 2019, is likely to receive a second term. This means continued implementation of the Green Deal, industrial competitiveness, and the EU climate commitments enacted since 2019 remain in place.

It is, however, an open question as to how much new legislation the next government can enact, especially with a potentially narrower majority. A more empowered set of far-right and nationalist parties could cause more disruption and attempt to slow policymaking down. Even here the far-

right's actions are unpredictable. These parties are fragmented. While most are aligned in opposition to migration and criticism of enacted climate action, they hold conflicting views on how to deal with Russia and China and where they fall regarding Euroscepticism. They could try to undermine Europe's unity in support of Ukraine and the overall strengthening of the Union, but that path is far from certain. Issues like agriculture, biodiversity, and migration policy could become more tenuous, with coalition partnerships shifting based on the topic. This will lead to more tension, less predictability, and potentially more protracted negotiations over some files.

## **National Influence of the European Election**

We should also look at the results of the EU elections from a Member State by Member State perspective. Contrary to many headlines, there was not a far-right wave across the continent. Results can be divided into two camps. The far-right gained or reinforced their support in Europe's three largest countries, Germany, France, and Italy. It failed to live up to expectations almost everywhere else, notably in Spain, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden, and even Hungary.

The biggest takeaway from Germany, France, and Italy is the normalizing of the far-right. The AfD in Germany, the National Rally in France, and the Brothers of Italy all trace their roots to World War II-era fascist parties. Until Brothers of Italy leader Giorgia Meloni became Italian Prime Minister in October 2022, none had ever gained power. During this election, France's National Rally outperformed every other party, prompting President Emmanuel Macron to call a snap election for June 20 and July 7. If the National Rally emerges as the strongest party in France in these snap elections, yet another major European economy falls under the influence of the far-right. At the EU level, these three national far-right parties are not fully aligned and have not yet agreed to cooperate, with Meloni and the Brothers of Italy supporting Ukraine and the European Union, while AfD and National Rally are suspiciously pro-Russia.

Across the rest of Europe, there were a variety of national factors that led to the underperformance of the far-right. We shouldn't read too much into the overall results and try to find pan-European trends. However, it is interesting to note that in several countries—Poland and Hungary in particular—incumbent or recently defeated far-right parties lost ground. This is in keeping with the global anti-incumbent mood among voters. The combination of the mainstreaming of the far-right and general anti-incumbency sentiment will only make policymaking and navigating European politics more difficult.

## **Lessons for Policymaking and Framing**

The broader challenge facing policymakers, political parties, and NGOs is how to interpret these results. There is a danger in viewing it as an endorsement of the past five years' policies and framing of issues. Persistent voter discontent, a growing anti-incumbent backlash, and the mainstreaming of far-right nationalist parties point to systemic risk. The pace and the volume of

legislation cannot continue in the next five years. Nor can it be oriented or framed around issues that many European voters feel are out of touch with, or negatively impact, their daily lives. The new EU leadership, and NGOs that support them, must be explicit about how the Green Deal's implementation will help improve the lives of everyday Europeans, support industry and agriculture in the EU, and reduce costs.

Reframing the actions the EU has taken over the past five years, justifiably, around improving the continent's security and competitiveness is an important start to addressing Europeans' concerns. The next step is to use these policies to enable each Member State to take the actions that will accelerate decarbonization, and address the economic and security issues front and center in their citizens' minds. If these policies, however, limit or are cast by the populist Right as limiting Europeans' choices or increasing their costs in the name of "climate action," the chance of creating an even greater backlash is significant.

## **Conclusion**

It is still too early to form firm conclusions on the full impact of the EU elections, and the results were too varied to apply generalizations to the entire Union. Moving forward, members of the climate and energy community must acknowledge that a change of approach is needed in the new mandate to ensure the durability of the net-zero transition. Continuing to engage in technical support for policy implementation and highlighting the need for Transatlantic cooperation on these, ultimately global, issues is important. It is even more critical now to acknowledge and address voter discontent, which is also being exploited by the far-right. There is an opportunity here to build on some of the synergies across US and EU audiences to engage citizens who feel uneasy with the changes occurring, or more insecure because of the cost of living and security crises, and incorporate their concerns in building a broader vision for climate action that is centered around competitiveness, energy security, transatlantic cooperation, and democracy.