

# FROM POSTS TO POLLS

LESSONS FROM THE 2024 EUROPEAN  
ELECTIONS ON STRENGTHENING YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT THROUGH  
EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES



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Between these major outputs, we address important aspects highlighted in the surveys that deserve more attention and a more nuanced, often qualitative, analysis. This present publication is part of such a deep dive.

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the social media strategies of political parties targeting young voters ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on Facebook and Instagram activity in Germany, Sweden, Hungary, and Poland. With social media emerging as a primary source of political information for young people—and considering the far right’s effective use of these platforms—the research investigates strategies to democratically engage young voters. By contextualising this social media analysis with detailed survey research on what concerned young Europeans before the elections and analysing whether and for whom they voted and their reasons for doing so, the findings offer valuable insights for political parties—especially social democrats—and policymakers aiming to enhance young people’s participation in future elections.

## Main findings

### 1. Decline in turnout of young people

- **Low participation rates:** the turnout of young people was low, at 36%, a 6% drop from 2019, and much lower than the overall turnout of 51%.
- **Country-specific trends:** Sweden experienced an almost one-third decrease in the turnout of young people. In Germany, 47% of young people voted. Poland had low participation of young people, at 25%, and Hungary was just below average, 34%.
- **Lack of mobilising issues:** unlike the 2019 elections, which were energised by the climate movement and Brexit discussions, the 2024 elections lacked similarly galvanising issues for young people.
- **Reasons for non-participation:** the primary reason cited by young non-voters was a lack

of interest in politics, rather than distrust or cynicism towards the political system.

### 2. Voting patterns of young people

#### • **Varied support across case-study countries:**

- *Hungary:* the new TISZA party attracted 54% of young voters, indicating a shift away from all other parties.
- *Germany:* CDU/CSU led, together with the Greens, with both scoring 14% of the young people’s vote, closely followed by the far-right AfD (13%). A notable 28% of young voters chose smaller, in large part, progressive parties.
- *Poland:* Civic Coalition (KO) led among young people, with 47%, while the far-right Konfederacja gained 30% of the young people’s vote.
- *Sweden:* a strong shift of young people to the left, with Social Democrats and Greens each receiving 29% of the young people’s vote; there was less support for the far right among young voters (10%).
- **Challenges for social democrats:** social democratic parties struggled to attract young voters, especially in Hungary and Poland, where centre-right parties were preferred. In Germany, the SPD’s weak results among young voters were partially offset by many young voters opting for other progressive alternatives.

### 3. Policy proposals matter

- **Reasons to choose a political party:** young voters prioritised policies aligning with their values over party loyalty or candidate appeal for choosing a party.
- **Key concerns varied regionally:**
  - Economic concerns were generally dominant, with key regional differences for other important concerns.
  - *Northern Europe:* climate change was a primary concern.
  - *Southern and Eastern Europe:* economic issues like the pandemic's aftermath and cost-of-living crisis were paramount.
  - *Eastern Europe:* the war in Ukraine dominated concerns.
- **Mixed messaging on social media:** while democratic parties in the respective countries partly addressed these issues, their messaging often lacked coherence and failed to present persuasive, future-oriented narratives.

### 4. Engagement over quantity on social media

- **Far right's effective engagement:** far-right parties achieved higher engagement from young people in fewer posts by using negative and toxic content amplified by social media algorithms, and their longstanding focus and professionalism of using social media as their main campaigning outlet.

**5. Democratic parties' shortcomings:** despite a higher posting frequency, social democrats struggled to generate comparable engagement. This may be due to a lack of compelling future-oriented narratives, messaging that didn't fully resonate with young audiences or a tendency to post less-provocative content.

### 6. Timing is crucial in the engagement of young people

- **Late-deciding voters:** many young voters made their decisions in the final weeks or days before the election.
- **Importance of last-minute campaigns:** there was an increase in social media posts targeting young people as the election approached, but efforts were inconsistent, indicating room for improvement in mobilising young people during critical periods.

## Implications for social democracy

### 1. Unlocking untapped potential

- **Large pool of non-voters:** with nearly two thirds of young people not voting, there's substantial potential for social democrats to expand their support. Social democratic parties could win over non-voters by focusing more directly on socio-economic issues, which are this group's primary concerns.
- **Formative influence:** engaging young voters early in their lives can establish long-term voting habits and party loyalty.
- **Positive perception:** social democrats are among the most liked and least rejected parties among young people, suggesting a certain credibility and openness to their messages if effectively communicated.
- **Boosting young people's interest in politics:** young people often cite disinterest in politics as a key reason for disengagement. Social democratic parties could boost young people's engagement by making political processes more appealing and relevant. Leveraging the high social desirability associated with voting could serve as one component of a broader strategy to increase turnout.

## 2. Crafting a positive vision amid crises

- **Addressing key concerns:** economic inequality, healthcare and climate change are top priorities for young voters and align with social democratic values.
- **Pro-European stance:** high EU favourability among young people supports a positive EU-focused narrative, which, by itself, however, does not suffice as a leading campaign theme.
- **Future-oriented narratives:** it's essential to acknowledge discontent amongst young people and present hopeful, forward-looking solutions, rather than merely opposing far-right positions or defending the status quo.
- **Avoiding far-right narratives:** adopting exclusionary or negative rhetoric can legitimise far-right ideologies and alienate potential supporters.

## 3. Revamping social media strategies

- **Engaging content creation:** break complex policies down into relatable, digestible content that resonates with young people's experiences.
- **Participatory approach:** shift from a one-way communication model to a participatory one that involves young people in dialogue and content sharing.
- **Learning from competitors:** study the far right's effective use of social media to enhance engagement without compromising democratic values.
- **Positive engagement:** focus on constructive, direct messaging that centres around young people's main concerns, but avoid toxic language, even if it garners fewer immediate interactions.

- **Platform accountability:** Enact legislation to hold social media platforms accountable by requiring them to adjust algorithms that currently favor negative content, thereby promoting healthier political discourse.
- **Long-term commitment:** recognise that reshaping the digital landscape requires sustained effort and collaborations between policymakers and tech companies.

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# INTRODUCTION

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Context

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections have significantly influenced the balance of power in EU lawmaking. Overall, far-right parties made significant gains, while liberal and green parties were the biggest losers. On the other hand, centre-right parties were able to slightly increase their share of the vote and social democratic parties approximately maintained their seats in the EP, while far-left parties were able to gain some additional seats. The results of the elections were highly awaited not only for their effects on EU lawmaking, but also because millions of young people cast their votes for the first time. The recent lowering of the voting age to 16 for the European elections in Germany and Belgium, alongside Austria and Malta, which previously allowed 16 year olds to vote has heightened politicians' focus on mobilising young voters.

Traditionally, voter turnout in elections, including EP elections, has been comparatively low among young people. However, this trend began to change in 2019, with the turnout of young people reaching record highs in many European countries.<sup>1</sup> Driven strongly by concerns about climate change and discussions around Brexit, this shift indicated growing interest among young people in European politics and increasing support for green political parties. Five years and multiple crises later, the political landscape in Europe has changed dramatically. The 2024 European elections witnessed a decline in voter turnout among young people under 25. Only 36% of eligible voters in this age group participated, marking a 6% decrease from the 42% turnout in the 2019 elections. All the while, the participation rate of the overall population remained stable at 51%. In addition, far-right parties have surged in popularity

in many countries, with significant backing also from young voters. In some countries, young voters are supporting anti-immigration or anti-establishment parties in numbers equal to, or even greater than, the rest of the population.

## Research questions and structure of the study

This study, published a few months after the 2024 European elections, focuses on engaging young voters in response to two key observations. Firstly, young voters increasingly access political news and shape their political opinions directly via social media. The EU survey on Youth and Democracy by Eurobarometer reveals that, while young people still view voting as the most effective way to make their voices heard by decisionmakers, "engaging on social media" ranks a close second, with 32% of young respondents selecting it as a preferred form of civic action.<sup>2</sup> Social media channels have become some of the most important vehicles for young people's political involvement, enabling rapid, large-scale mobilisation across national borders. On these platforms, young individuals stay informed about political issues and current events they find relevant, often engaging with content shared by political parties and other political actors.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, recent national elections in different European countries have highlighted the effectiveness of far-right parties in leveraging social media to attract new followers, particularly among young voters. For example, in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' far-right Freedom Party won the 2023 election with a campaign linking affordable housing to immigration restrictions – a message that resonated strongly with young voters. Similarly, in Portugal, the far-right party Chega tapped into young people's frustrations over the housing crisis.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the 2024 European election results echoed earlier trends in national elections, showing

that young people are turning to far-right parties in greater numbers than before.<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon is closely linked to broader structural changes within European party systems. Over the past decade, support for far-right parties has steadily risen, while most mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties have experienced a decline. Younger generations, in particular, having not yet established firm political loyalties, tend to be more open to supporting new and emerging parties.<sup>7</sup>

To grasp the significance of analysing how political parties engaged young voters in their EP election campaigns, it's essential to consider the broader context: election campaigns are increasingly digital, with social media now playing a central role in shaping political discourse and message delivery. This study unfolds in an environment where regulators have acknowledged many of the associated risks and enacted relevant legislation. However, the full implementation of these regulations remains in its early stages, with some measures only reaching full capacity after the June 2024 European elections. In response to the need for regulated social media campaigning, the EU introduced the “transparency and targeting of political advertising”<sup>8</sup> regulation for the 2024 elections, designed to work alongside the Digital Services Act (DSA), which took effect in August 2023. While the DSA requires platforms – among many other things – to address systemic electoral risks, the new regulations focus specifically on political advertising, both online and offline, setting standards to enhance transparency, ensure fairness in online advertising and protect democratic processes.<sup>9</sup>

Since the political advertising regulation only came into effect in April 2024 and will fully apply by October 2025, its impact on the 2024 elections was limited. Although the EU has encouraged early adoption, full implementation will depend on platforms' willingness to comply and the enforcement capacity of EU and national authorities. The regulation's effectiveness will ultimately be tested in future elections, with continuous adjustments and rigorous enforcement necessary to ensure transparent, fair online campaigns and to protect democratic integrity in the EU.<sup>10</sup> These policies were not the

focal point of our inquiry, but the effectiveness of their implementation deserves the full attention of future policy research and impact assessments.

The growing reliance on social media in campaigns, coupled with the recent success of far-right parties in mobilizing young voters, led us to examine key questions: How are political parties—including those beyond the far right—engaging young voters in the European elections? Are they reaching out via social media, and, if so, with what frequency and through which specific strategies? What topics are they prioritizing in their messaging, and to what extent are their social media efforts resonating with young audiences? Finally, is there evidence that far-right parties are outperforming other parties in their outreach to young voters on social media platforms? To explore these questions, we analysed Instagram and Facebook posts to identify key themes, emotional tone and messaging strategies related to young voters. Focusing on Germany, Hungary, Poland and Sweden for geographic diversity and varied party dynamics, we selected posts from far-right, green, conservative and social democratic parties. With data collected by Democracy Reporting International using CrowdTangle (1 March-15 June 2024), we filtered for election-related content targeting young people. Posts were translated into English, with BERTopic used for theme analysis and sentiment analysis to assess emotional tone and engagement levels. Additionally, a spin-off project conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation performed a separate qualitative analysis of TikTok content shared by political actors in Germany, providing insights into how this platform uniquely influences young people's engagement.<sup>11</sup> A detailed presentation of the TikTok findings is beyond the scope of this study. This chapter, **Chapter 2**, is the core, or “meat” of our analysis, in a policy study structured like a sandwich.

To contextualise the social media monitoring findings, in **Chapter 1** – or the top layer of the sandwich – we analysed original survey data gathered in the months leading up to the election. This chapter draws on a study conducted by dIpart in April and May 2024 across eight EU member states – France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Sweden –



with a representative sample of 10,644 respondents aged 18-80.<sup>12</sup> It offers insights into the prevailing hopes, concerns and political attitudes of European citizens. For this chapter, respondents were divided into two age groups for comparison: a younger group (aged 18-24) and an older group (aged 25-80). In particular, the chapter aims to examine the issues that young people deemed most important to them ahead of the EP elections. This approach enabled us to assess whether these priority topics also featured in political parties' social media campaigns. Given that social media impact often relies on sentiment – whether negative, positive or complex – we aimed to better understand the prevailing mood among young people. We also examined the degree of openness and tolerance displayed by young voters toward far-right perspectives. Our objective was to frame the social media findings within a broader context, potentially shedding light on why far-right content often resonates with younger audiences.

Next, at the bottom of our sandwich, to ground our discussion of political campaigning on social media in concrete outcomes, in **Chapter 3**, we examine the actual votes of young people in the European elections. This chapter presents data from Eurobarometer's EU post-electoral survey<sup>13</sup> analysed specifically for young people's voting behaviour, focusing on individuals aged 15-24 across Sweden, Germany, Poland and Hungary. We asked the following key questions. Who did young people vote for? What factors influenced their decision to vote – or not to vote? Why did they choose one party over another? These insights support our aim to draw tentative conclusions about the effectiveness of social media strategies in shaping young people's political preferences and engagement. By understanding the voting behaviours and motivations of young people, we can better assess how well campaign efforts aligned with young people's priorities and concerns.

Lastly, in **Chapter 4**, we bring together and discuss the main findings of the previous three chapters and their implications for social democrats. We engage in a broader discussion to demonstrate that social democrats have untapped potential to engage young people. We contend that social democrats must adopt bolder and more relevant narratives that

address the widespread discontent among young people and redesign their social media strategies to enhance engagement with these narratives. Such efforts not only hold promise for future European election campaigns, which seem distant at the moment, but can also unlock potential in national elections, fostering deeper, long-term connections with young voters.



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# **1. POLITICAL ATTITUDES AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE:**

## **ANALYSING SENTIMENTS AHEAD OF THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS**

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# 1. POLITICAL ATTITUDES AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE:

## ANALYSING SENTIMENTS AHEAD OF THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

*Authors: Neele Eilers, Tobias Spöri*

### 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we analyse political attitudes, sentiments and priorities among young people across the EU, providing insights into what was politically most important to them leading up to the EP Elections. This analysis draws on d|part's comprehensive study, which surveyed the general population in eight EU member states – France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Sweden – during April and May 2024. It sampled a representative group of 10,644 respondents aged 18-80 overall and provided a nuanced perspective on the prevailing hopes, concerns and political attitudes of European citizens.<sup>14</sup> For the analysis in this chapter, respondents were divided into two age groups to allow for comparison: a younger group, consisting of respondents aged 16<sup>15</sup>/18-24 and an older group of respondents aged 25-80.

The chapter opens by examining young people's sentiments on the overall societal situation, focusing on political dissatisfaction and future outlooks. It then explores their main political hopes and concerns, including economic inequality, climate change and social welfare. Perceptions of past crisis management, which have heightened political disillusionment, are discussed subsequently. Building on this analysis, this chapter also addresses the prevalence and normalisation of far-right attitudes across age groups with European societies. Finally, the chapter reviews young people's perspectives on the EU itself. Together, these insights provide a foundation for the final discussion of this study, where we consider how political parties

have responded to these priorities, addressed young people's discontent and presented a vision of Europe that resonates with young people's aspirations.

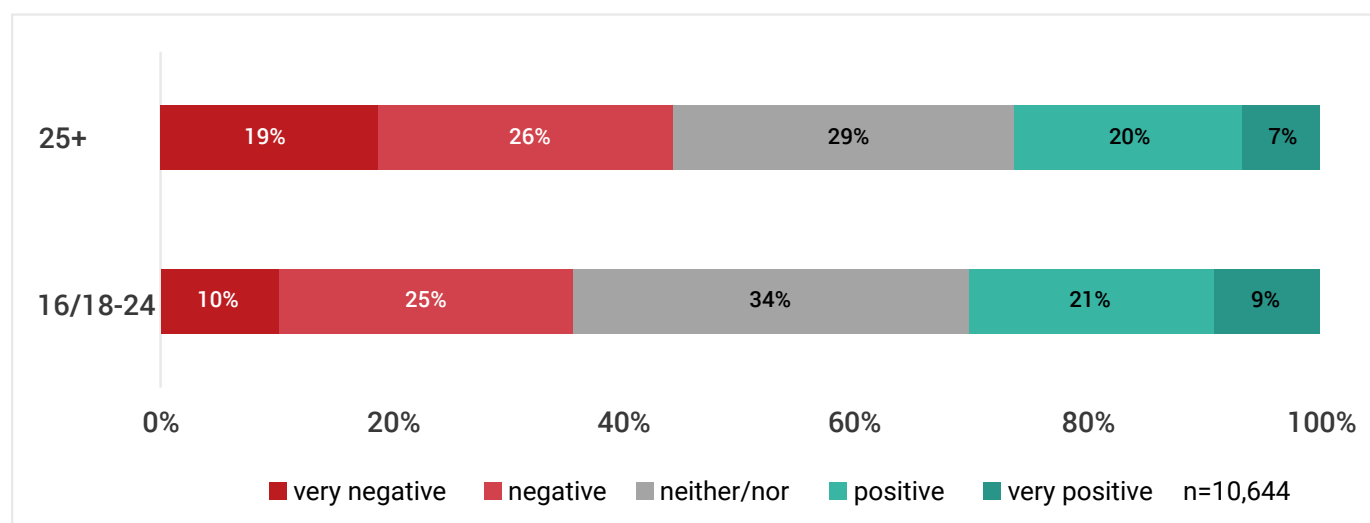
While this data analysis offers valuable insights into the current overall picture of young people's political attitudes across the EU, it's essential to recognise that "young people" are far from a monolithic group; their perspectives are heterogeneous and shaped by diverse factors, including socio-demographics such as income, education and gender, as well as regional context and political socialisation. As such, this analysis is, in some instances, necessarily a simplification, but, wherever possible, it highlights nuanced differences between countries and party preferences to provide a more comprehensive picture of young people's perspectives across the EU.

### 1.2 Points of concern: Core political issues through the eyes of young Europeans

#### 1.2.1 Mixed feelings: Young people's evaluations of societal conditions across Europe

Ahead of the 2024 EP elections, our data reveals a high level of political dissatisfaction among the general population across the EU. As discussed in this chapter, this sentiment is largely driven by discontent with past crisis management and various social and economic concerns. Young people across the EU also share this widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of politics, economy and society. However, compared to older age groups,

**Figure 1. Evaluation of the overall political, societal and economic situation in respondents' countries by age group (in %).**



they tend to have either similar feelings or be slightly less negative about the current societal situation in their respective countries.

When initially asked to assess the current societal situation in their respective countries, young respondents aged 16/18-24 across the eight countries surveyed expressed rather mixed views. While 35% evaluated the overall situation as negative or very negative, a nearly equal proportion felt it was neither negative nor positive. In contrast, 30% of young respondents expressed a positive or very positive sentiment regarding the current economic, social and political climate in their countries.

This distribution is particularly interesting when compared to the general population aged over 25, where sentiments were, on average, more negative. In fact, 45% of older respondents assessed the overall societal situation as negative or very negative, compared to 35% among younger respondents. This indicates that young people perceive the current state of society as somewhat more positive than their older counterparts, reflecting lower levels of dissatisfaction and discontent on average (Figure 1).

However, sentiments towards the overall societal situation varied considerably between countries, including among young people. French and German respondents aged between 16 and 24 expressed the most negative assessments; with 43% of young people in France being dissatisfied – though this is lower than the 56% dissatisfaction rate among the general population. In Germany, 44% of young respondents expressed discontent about the current state of society, closely mirroring the overall sentiment of the German population. Also in Sweden, young respondents (38%) shared lower levels of dissatisfaction in comparison to the general population (49%). In contrast, young people in Poland were notably more dissatisfied with the overall political, societal and economic situation than the general population, with 32% expressing negative views, compared to 24% among older respondents.

Moreover, these perspectives were not shared homogeneously across populations and differed according to party political preferences. While respondents aged over 25 who sympathise with far-right parties were among the most dissatisfied, their young supporters were notably less negative, aligning more closely with average views. Similar to their older counterparts, young conservatives

shared a comparatively positive societal evaluation overall. Also, young supporters of the social democrats shared less dissatisfaction, showing a slightly more positive sentiment compared to their older counterparts. In contrast, young respondents sympathetic to the greens and the left, and those without a party preference, expressed the highest levels of discontent regarding the overall societal situation.

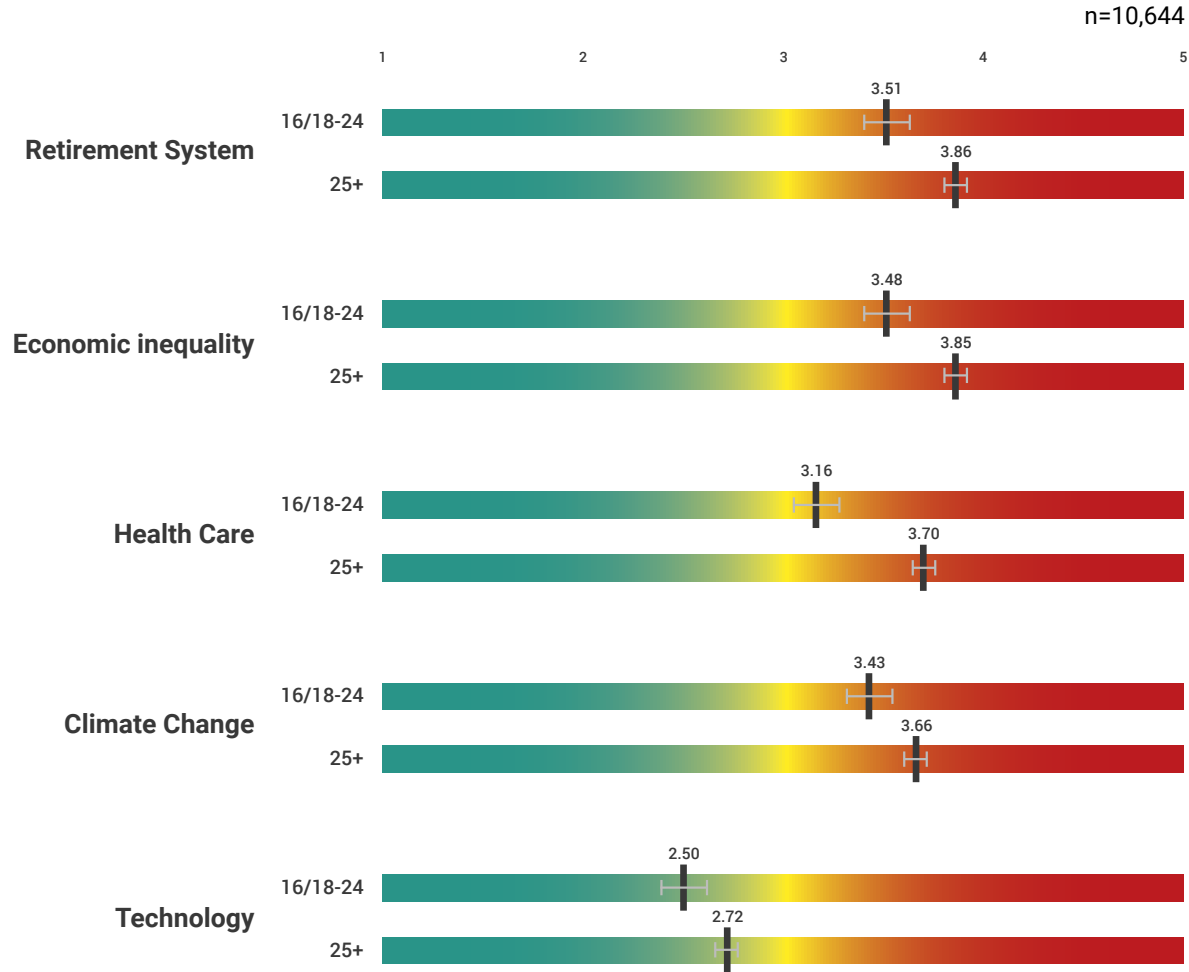
1.2.2 Common ground: Shared concerns among young and older generations in the EU

In addition to the general assessment of the current state of society, young people across the EU identified a range of specific topics as being

particularly concerning. When asked about issues like healthcare or economic inequality, for example, a picture of widespread dissatisfaction with the current political and social situation emerges.

In the survey, respondents rated their current feelings about various societal issues on a scale from one (very hopeful) to five (very concerned). The data revealed that respondents across the surveyed countries were overall rather concerned about pressing topics such as economic inequality, healthcare and retirement systems. In fact, most surveyed issues received average scores above three, indicating a sense of concern and a negative perception of the current state of these societal issues. Figure 2 displays five of these topics from the overall list.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 2. Sentiments regarding various societal issues on a scale from 1 (very hopeful) to 5 (very concerned).



While young respondents generally expressed slightly lower levels of concern compared to the overall population, they were still rather worried about a range of issues. Across all surveyed topics, their average scores exceeded a value of three (except for technological developments), indicating a prevailing sense of concern. Economic inequality, climate change and retirement systems were particularly prominent concerns among respondents aged 16-24, demonstrating that young people's worries span multiple challenges. Notably, the retirement system stood out as the most concerning issue for both age groups, emphasising the urgent need to address this generational issue across the EU. Also, economic inequality was among the highest level of concern for both young and older respondents.

Interestingly, concerns about climate change can no longer be viewed as solely a predominantly young people's issue.<sup>17</sup> It's not that climate change no longer matters to young people; rather, it has become one of several critical issues that demand attention. Moreover, older respondents display similar levels of concern regarding climate change, indicating a similar recognition of the crisis's impact across generations.

Examined by country, the survey data indicated that people across the EU were most concerned about the issues of economic equality and retirement systems. Both societal issues ranked among the top-two most concerning issues in every surveyed country. While there are generally no significant differences between the countries, some nuances exist. The third most concerning societal issue varies: in Poland, the healthcare system is viewed as particularly troubling; while in Sweden, general social security takes precedence. In Germany, social cohesion is regarded as a pressing issue.

### **1.2.3 Hope versus reality: Assessing future living standards among young Europeans**

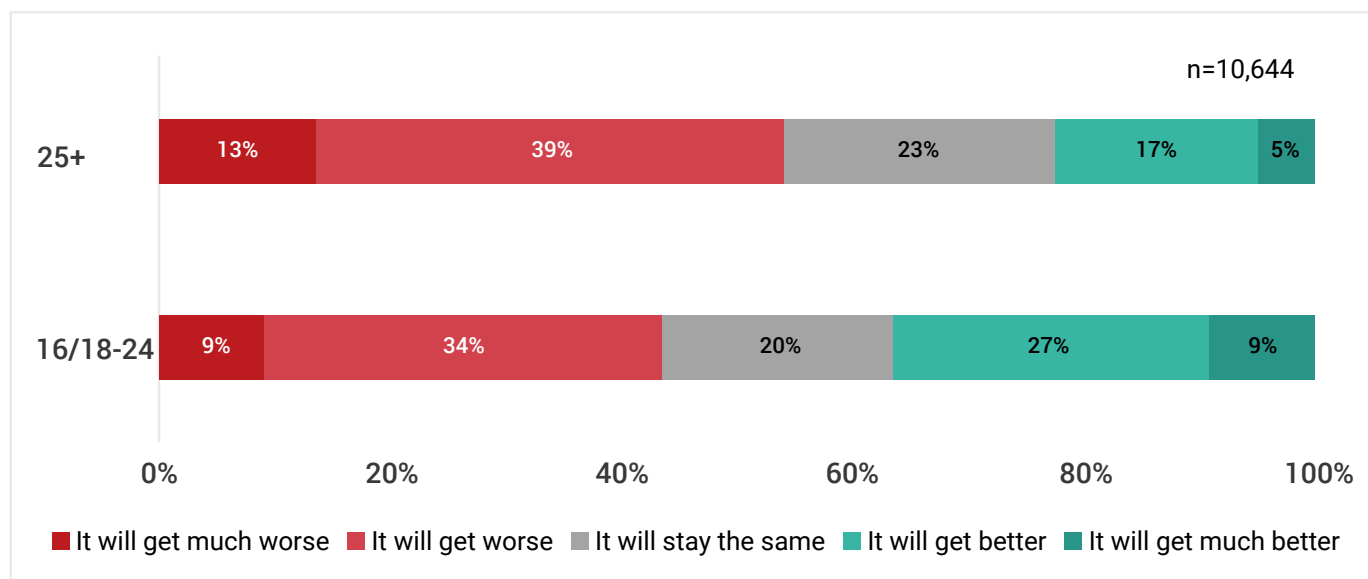
When looking into the near future, young people had a mixed outlook on the expected standard of living in their countries, again with a prevailing sense of pessimism. Among respondents aged 16-24, a share of 43% expected their country's standard of

living to worsen over the next three to five years (Figure 3). While 20% anticipated it will remain the same, 36% believed it will improve. With these mixed views, young respondents tended to express again a slightly less pessimistic view compared to the general population, being less inclined to believe that living standards will decline.

Young people's expectations regarding future living standards varied across the surveyed countries. The case of Germany stands out, as young people's outlook reflects significant malaise, with a substantial 62% of those aged 16-24 expecting a decline in future living standards – closely aligning with the broader pessimism of the general German population. In Sweden, however, young respondents showed a relatively more optimistic perspective, with only 31% expecting a decline, and generally expressing less concern about future economic challenges compared to older respondents. Conversely, young people in Poland expressed a slightly more pessimistic view, with 49% expecting a downturn in living standards, which is higher than the 44% seen among the general population. Overall, in all countries except Poland, younger respondents were generally less pessimistic about the future development of living standards in their respective countries than the rest of the population.

Differences in expectations for future living standards were also evident across political party preferences. Across all party affiliations, young people generally exhibited a slightly more optimistic outlook than the general population. As with current societal dissatisfaction discussed above, young supporters of far-right parties appeared less pessimistic about future living standards than their older counterparts. Also, young supporters of the left, despite high dissatisfaction with the current situation, were also slightly less pessimistic about the future. Young social democrats mirrored this trend, showing less concern than older party sympathisers. However, the highest levels of pessimism about future living standards were found among supporters of the greens in both age groups, as well as among those without a party affiliation.

**Figure 3. Expected standard of living in respondents' countries over the next 3-5 years.**



However, this rather bleak view of the development of a country's overall standard of living might be driven more by perceptions of the overall economic situation than by expectations for individual fortunes. Nearly 60% of young respondents foresee improvements in their personal financial situations over the next few years, in stark contrast to only 29% of those aged over 25. This difference likely reflects the transitional phase many young people are in as they complete their education or enter the job market, with expectations of future advancement. Nonetheless, this optimism about personal prospects does not alleviate the broader negative outlook on national living standards. It suggests that across many European societies the promise of prosperity is increasingly seen as unfulfilled, contributing to a growing sense of disillusionment among many.

#### 1.2.4 Crises in Europe: Assessing government responses from the perspective of young people

Crises narratives have dominated the life of European populations and politics in the last years. Comprehensive challenges, such as the Russian war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, have substantively shaken European politics ahead of the EP elections in 2024. These overlapping crises have intensified economic hardships and social tensions across the continent. Our data demonstrates that the predominantly negative perception of political crisis management by national governments in recent years has contributed significantly to political discontent among the overall population.

In this regard, young respondents did not differ greatly from the rest of the population, but they tended to express slightly lower levels of dissatisfaction regarding their national governments' crisis management across various issues. For instance, among both age groups, dissatisfaction was especially high for the handling of the cost-of-living crisis: 74% of respondents aged over 25 reported dissatisfaction, compared to 64% of young respondents aged 16-24 (Figure 4). While

younger respondents were less dissatisfied than their older counterparts, the cost-of-living crisis nonetheless emerged as the most pressing concern for both age groups. This reflects shared high levels of dissatisfaction and prioritisation of political responses to the immediate economic challenges experienced in daily life.

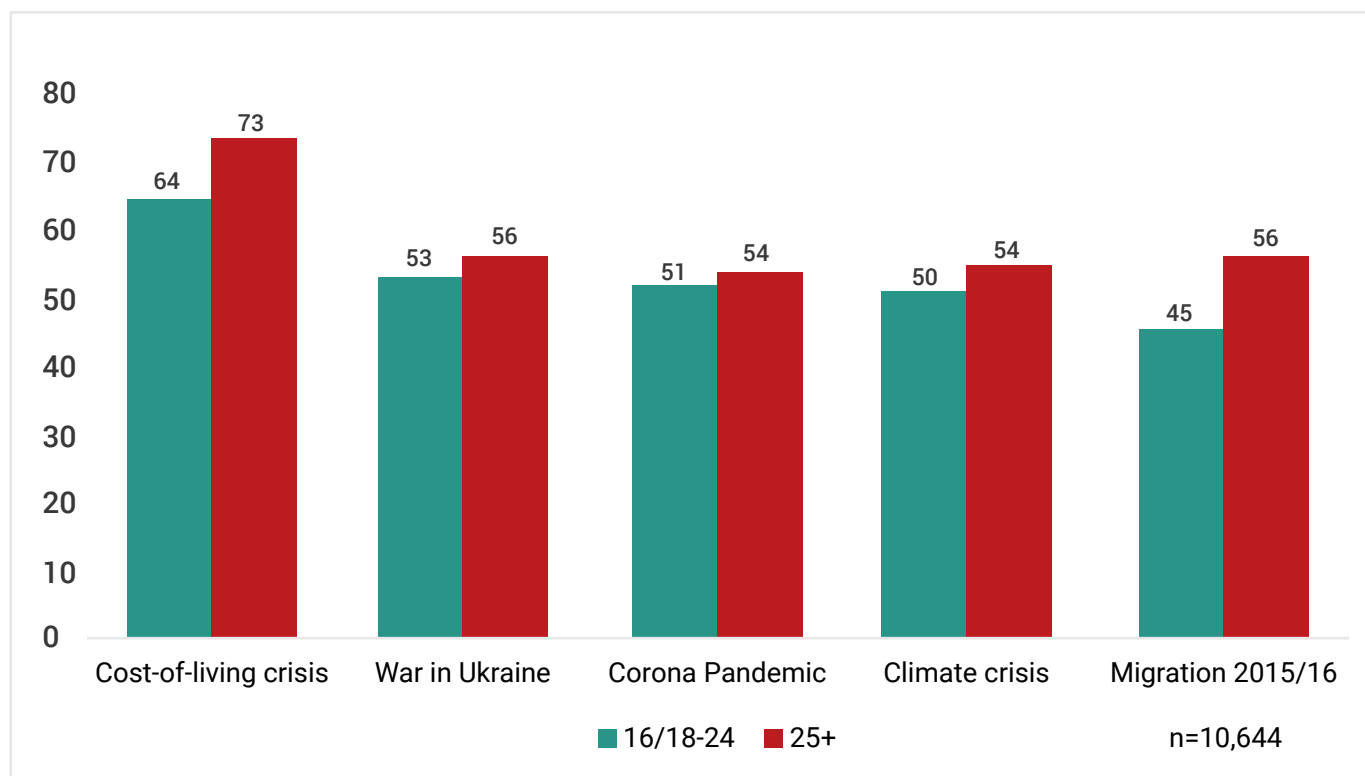
However, it became evident that young respondents were also dissatisfied with multiple pressing challenges they would like to see addressed better by their national governments. Besides the cost-of-living crisis, they expressed similar levels of dissatisfaction with the political management of their respective governments of the Russian war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, akin to older respondents aged over 25. Dissatisfaction levels exceeded 50% for each of these challenges, with one in two expressing dissatisfaction or strong dissatisfaction with

the national governments' management of the challenges.

Interestingly, the political response of their national governments to the climate crisis was viewed similarly by both younger and older respondents, challenging the notion that it was primarily a concern for young people. In fact, older respondents were slightly more dissatisfied with government responses to climate change. Conversely, young respondents expressed notably less dissatisfaction with the management of the migration crisis of 2015-2016, indicating that this issue resonates more with older generations. Here, this may be mostly due to the time gap, as many of the younger respondents were still children during this period.

Dissatisfaction with national governments' management of the various crises also differed across the EU. In all surveyed countries, respondents expressed greater dissatisfaction with the handling

**Figure 4. Satisfaction with respective national governments regarding crisis management by age group (in %).**





of the cost-of-living crisis compared to the Russian war in Ukraine. However, dissatisfaction levels were comparatively lower in Romania and Sweden, while they were notably high in France, Italy, Germany and Poland. The biggest differences in dissatisfaction were observed regarding government responses to the Russian war in Ukraine. In Sweden, and Romania, less than half of respondents expressed discontent, whereas around two thirds of respondents in Germany, Italy, France and Poland viewed their governments' engagement with the war negatively.

### **1.3 Blurring boundaries: The normalisation of far-right ideologies in Europe**

In the 2024 EP elections, we observed a notable gain in favour of right-wing forces. Even before the elections, there was considerable discussion about whether the widespread levels of dissatisfaction and negative outlooks for the future could play into the hands of such populist and far-right forces in the EU. Many analysts and commentators warned that rising political dissatisfaction, fuelled by crisis narratives, economic challenges and social issues, might bolster the appeal of populist narratives. In addition to these factors, the public debate has witnessed a strong normalisation of far-right positions, which has further blurred the lines between mainstream political discourse and extremist viewpoints.

To investigate the societal spread of right-wing extremist attitudes, we asked respondents about their approval or disapproval of various extreme-right statements across different domains: group-focused enmity such as racism and antisemitism; national chauvinism and authoritarianism; homophobia; and gender conservatism.<sup>18</sup> Merely agreeing with a single statement is not sufficient to comprehensively assess far-right attitudes. Therefore, we have developed an index that combines statements to capture far-right attitudes across these different dimensions to form a comprehensive picture. By taking the approval rates of eight surveyed statements together, we created an index showing the mean approval rates of extreme-right attitudes. This index can be understood as a score from zero (no approval of extreme-right attitudes) to one (full

approval of all extreme-right statements). Figure 5 displays the index, indicating the mean approval of extreme-right attitudes by country and age groups.

As Figure 5 shows, approval ratings for extreme-right attitudes varied by country, but remained relatively high across all surveyed countries. Respondents in Greece, Latvia, Poland and Romania scored higher, on average, showing greater agreement with extreme-right attitudes overall. Although in Germany, France, Italy and Sweden the mean values were lower, at around 0.4, the approval of extreme-right views was still prominent. Young respondents aged 16-24 did not greatly differ, in that regard, from older respondents in most countries. They shared similarly high levels of agreement with extreme-right attitudes to the general population in most countries, though it was notably lower among young people in Italy and somewhat lower in Germany.

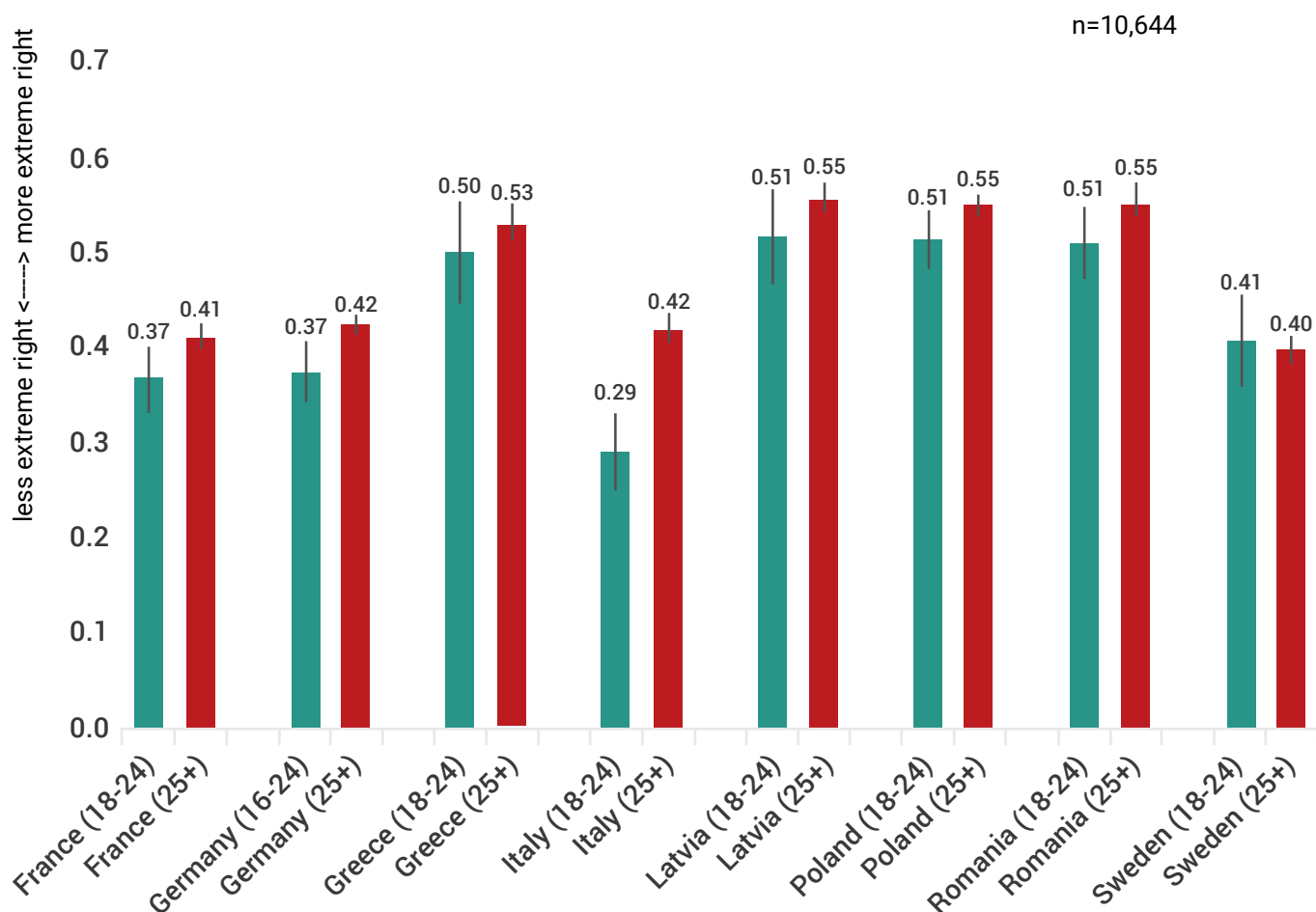
Nonetheless, there were differences in the areas of agreement between age groups. Approval of statements regarding group-focused enmity (such as homophobia, antisemitism and cultural racism) was notably high across the surveyed EU member states. Yet, in Germany, France and Italy, young people expressed significantly lower levels of agreement with those statements. For instance, in response to the racist and classist statement, "Most refugees only come here to exploit the welfare state", only about half as many young people in these three countries agreed with this statement compared to older respondents, demonstrating again that issues related to migration are less concerning for younger people than for older age groups.

While overall anti-democratic views were most prevalent among far-right supporters and their approval diminished further left on the political spectrum, they were relatively widespread across various political party families. Observing the index disaggregated by party families across all countries in Figure 6, it becomes evident that sympathisers of far-right parties, unsurprisingly, demonstrated the highest approval rates for extreme-right statements across the surveyed EU member states.

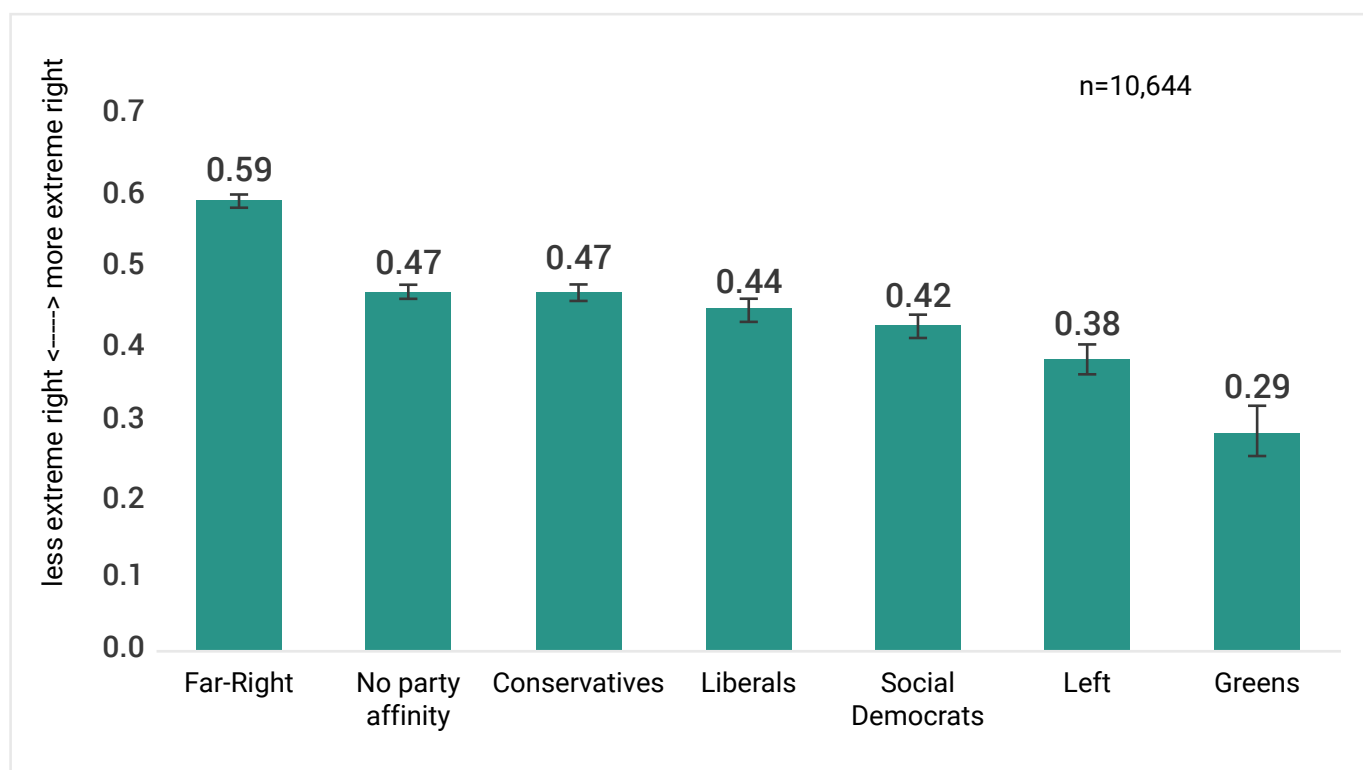
With some distance, supporters of conservative parties and individuals without any party affinity displayed elevated levels of approval for extreme-right attitudes. Also, liberals and social democrats both ranked relatively high, suggesting that a substantive portion of their supporters aligned with numerous of the extreme-right statements. Green party supporters, on the other hand, demonstrated the lowest level of approval for extreme-right attitudes. These results reinforce findings from other studies that illustrate how extreme-right attitudes are increasingly prevalent among supporters of democratic parties.<sup>19</sup> Far-right attitudes have thus permeated various political party families, including centre-left parties, indicating a broader and alarming acceptance of such views.

Again, there were no significant differences between the age groups regarding the approval of extreme-right attitudes based on party preferences. Young people showed preferences that were largely aligned with those of older party affiliates. However, young individuals without any party affiliation expressed substantially fewer far-right attitudes compared to older individuals without party affiliation. This suggests that far-right slogans resonate less with young people, indicating that pro-democratic parties should specifically engage with this demographic.

**Figure 5. Index of agreement with statements on right-wing extremist attitudes by country (mean values and 95% confidence intervals are shown).**



**Figure 6. Index of agreement with statements on right-wing extremist attitudes by party family (mean values and 95% confidence intervals are shown).**



## 1.4 The EU landscape: Mixed sentiments among young and older Europeans

### 1.4.1 Slightly more positive: Young Europeans and their views on the EU

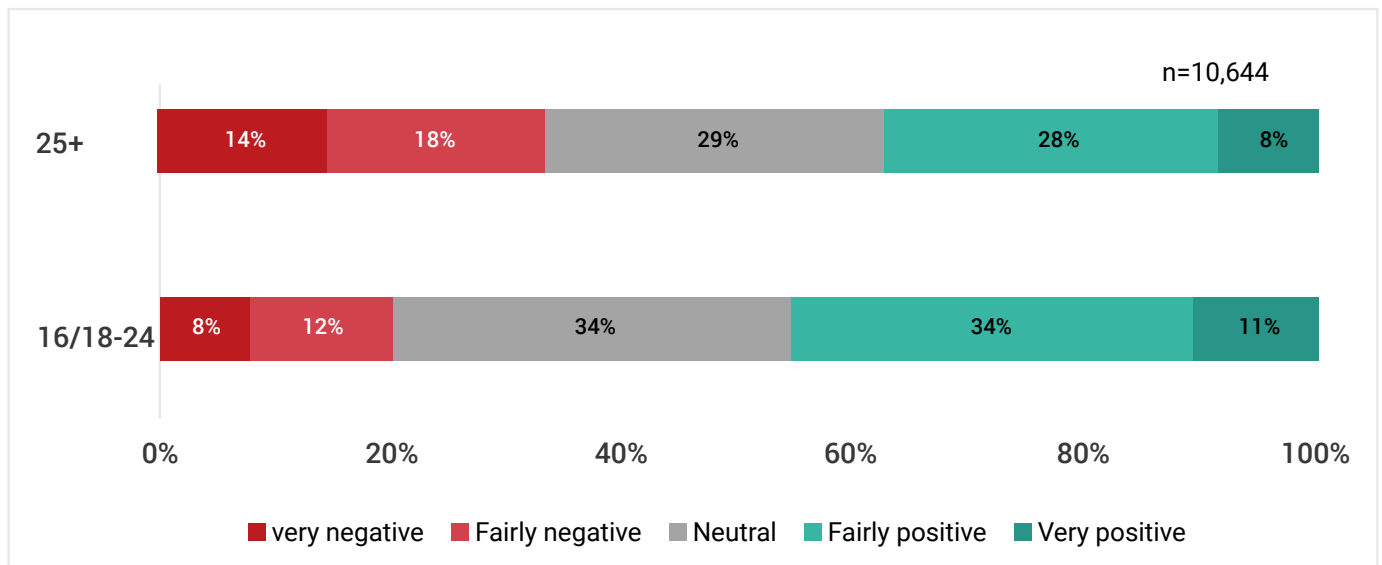
Ahead of the 2024 European elections, the widespread prevalence of far-right attitudes and the anticipated rise of anti-EU parties promoting nativist narratives fuelled concerns about an increasingly polarised shift in public sentiment about the EU, its policies and future scenarios for the EU.

Regarding the general view of the EU, the data revealed a mixed perception of the EU among different age groups (Figure 7). At 45%, almost half of the respondents aged 16-24 had a positive or fairly positive general view of the EU compared to 36% among older respondents aged over 25. Notably, a significant portion remained neutral, with 34% of

younger individuals and 29% of older respondents sharing this perspective. At the same time, there was a higher percentage of older individuals who viewed the EU fairly negatively or very negatively (32%) compared to 20% of younger respondents. Overall, younger individuals tended to have a more favourable outlook on the EU compared to their older counterparts; however, both groups exhibited a notable proportion of neutral opinions, indicating a mixed sentiment regarding the EU's role and effectiveness.

These trends could be observed in all surveyed countries, but it was particularly prevalent in Italy and Sweden. In Italy, younger respondents aged 16-24 demonstrated a more favourable perception of the EU, with 48% expressing positive views, compared to 29% of those aged over 25. Conversely, older respondents exhibited a higher percentage of negative perceptions (45%), while only 17% of the younger age group shared these

**Figure 7. Image respondents have of the EU by age group (in %).**



negative sentiments. Similarly, in Sweden, younger respondents expressed a similarly positive attitude toward the EU (55%), compared to 36% of those aged over 25. Conversely, older respondents expressed higher negative sentiments (30%), whereas only 13% of younger respondents shared these negative perceptions.

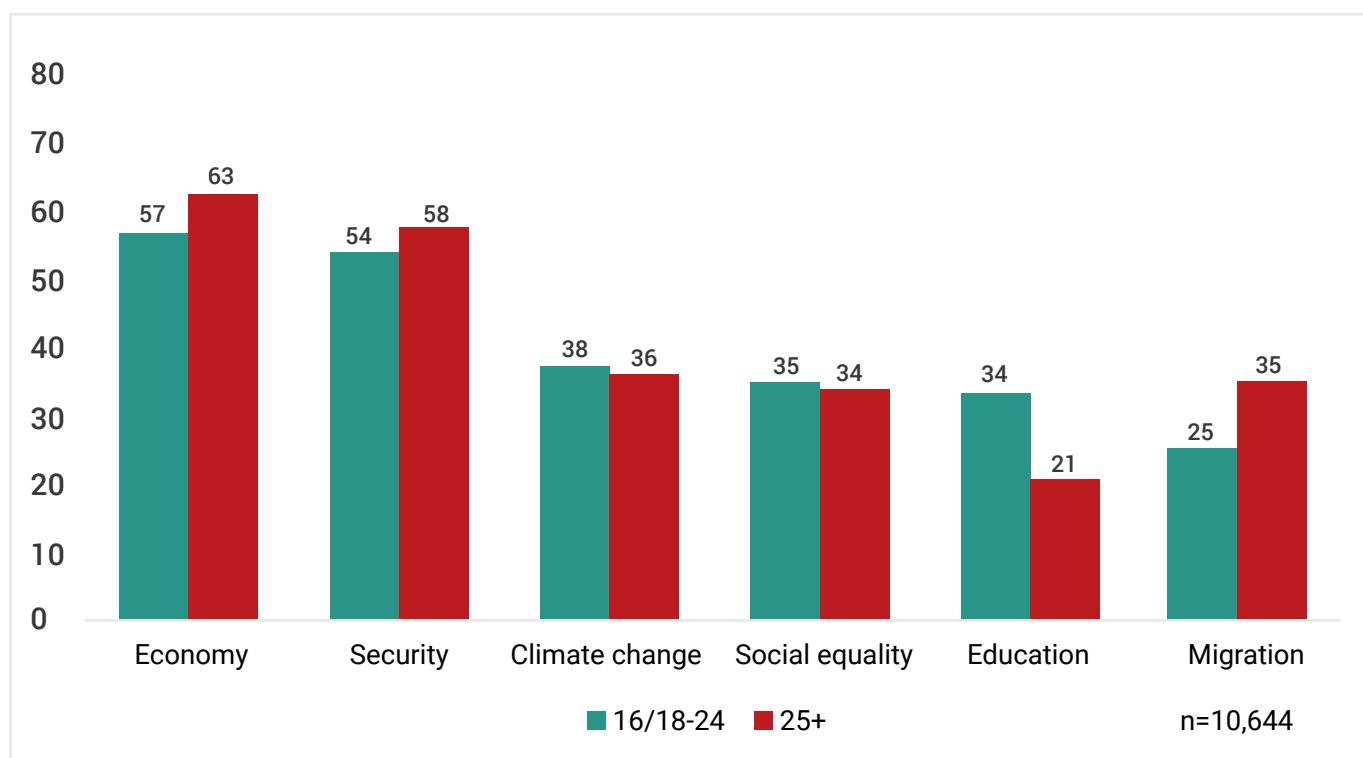
In contrast, young respondents in Germany showed similar sentiments toward the EU as the general population, with positive views held by 35% of the younger age group and 34% of older respondents. Negative perceptions were also comparable, with 28% of younger and 34% of older German respondents viewing the EU unfavourably. In Poland, positive views of the EU were similarly high among both young (42%) and older respondents (46%). However, negative perceptions were notably lower among young people (20%) compared to their older counterparts (31%).

#### 1.4.2 Aligning goals: Young and older Europeans share economic concerns, but differ on education

Alongside the mixed image of the EU overall, the campaigning period ahead of the EP elections is likely one of the few moments people actively engage with policy options at the European level. For this reason, the survey asked about key policy areas, inviting respondents to select up to three they believed should be EU priorities in the upcoming years. Given the complex division of competences among the EU and national and local politics, these preferences likely reflect more of a vision for the EU's ideal priorities than its current competencies. Figure 8 shows the percentages of respondents who selected each policy area as one of the three most important ones.

The survey results revealed small notable differences in priority areas between younger (16-24) and older (25+) age groups in the EU. For both groups, the economy was the top priority, with 57% of younger respondents and 63% of older respondents selecting it as one of their top-three political priorities for the EU. Security and defence followed closely, with

**Figure 8. Respondents' three most important political priorities for the EU in the next few years (in %).**



54% of younger respondents and 58% of older respondents indicating its importance. Climate change was a substantial concern for both age groups, as younger respondents (38%) valued it similarly to older respondents (36%).

Likewise, social equality was important for both age groups, with 35% of younger respondents selecting it compared to 34% of older respondents. Unsurprisingly, education ranked higher among younger respondents (34%) than older ones (21%), highlighting a generational emphasis on this issue. Conversely, migration was seen as a more pressing concern for older respondents, with 35% prioritising it compared to 25% of younger respondents. Overall, young people emphasised similar political priorities to the general population, showing a broadly aligned perspective on key policy areas, though with some differences in focus between age groups.

While economic growth and security and defence were top priorities across all countries, the degree of importance varied. The economic situation was seen as a lesser priority in France (53%), Sweden (55%) and Germany (56%), but was more prioritised in Latvia (71%) and Italy (72%). For security, demand for policies was higher in France (61%), Latvia (68%) and Poland (72%), but lower in Greece (47%), Italy (49%) and Germany (50%). Migration was particularly important in Germany (45%) and Sweden (46%), but less so in Latvia (19%), Romania (22%), Poland (29%) or Italy (29%). A similar trend was observed for climate change, with lower prioritisation in Latvia (24%) and Poland (29%) compared to France (42%) and Italy (49%).

In most policy preferences across countries, young people showed only slight deviations from older age groups, suggesting that national context influences opinions more than age, with migration and education as notable exceptions. Germany and Sweden stood

out in regard to migration. Concerning EU migration policy, 29% of young Germans prioritised it as a top-three policy preference, compared to 48% of older Germans. In Sweden, 35% of young respondents prioritised migration versus 47% of older ones. Education consistently ranked highly across all eight countries, with the largest disparity observed in Sweden, where 41% of younger respondents support it compared to just 16% of older respondents.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the diverse political attitudes and sentiments of young people across the EU, revealing their key concerns and aspirations as they approached the EP elections in comparison with the older electorates. By analysing data from the comprehensive dIpart study, we gained a nuanced understanding of the political views and sentiments of young people, underscoring the importance of addressing their expressed needs and priorities in future political discourse.

1. **Widespread political dissatisfaction:** leading up to the 2024 EP elections, political dissatisfaction with the current state of politics, economy and society was widespread across the EU. Young people shared this dissatisfaction, although they had an overall slightly less negative assessment of the current situation than older respondents.
2. **Concerns about the future are widespread:** there is a pervasive pessimistic outlook on the future among Europeans, with many fearing a decline in their countries' living standards in the coming years. While young people largely share this pessimistic outlook for national prosperity to nearly the same extent, they remain more optimistic about their personal prospects.
3. **Economic and social policies as key concerns among young people:** young people across the EU are particularly concerned about issues like economic inequality, the retirement system, healthcare and climate change, not differing much from older respondents.

4. **Normalisation of far-right attitudes across age groups:** approval of far-right attitudes has been normalised within European societies to worrying levels across age groups. Becoming increasingly mainstream, they are shared not only by far-right supporters but also by substantial segments of conservative, liberal and social democratic voters. Young people show similar levels of agreement with extreme-right views as older respondents, but with some regional variation.
5. **Perception of the EU is mixed, but more positive among the young:** young respondents tended to have a more positive view of the EU compared to older generations. However, overall, both age groups showed mixed sentiments, with a substantial portion expressing a neutral view on the EU.
6. **Economy and security seen as top political priorities for the EU:** economic and security policies were seen as top priorities to be addressed by the EU in the next years among both age groups, followed by climate change. Compared to the general population, young people placed less importance on migration-related issues, but more on education as a political priority across the EU.

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## **2. LESS IS MORE: HOW POLITICAL PARTIES REACHED YOUNG VOTERS ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM**

**INSIGHTS FROM THE 2024  
EUROPEAN ELECTION  
CAMPAIGNS ACROSS FOUR  
COUNTRIES**

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# 2. LESS IS MORE: HOW POLITICAL PARTIES REACHED YOUNG VOTERS ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

## INSIGHTS FROM THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS ACROSS FOUR COUNTRIES

*Authors: Elena Avramoska, Matteo Dressler, Michael Jennewein<sup>20</sup>*

### 2.1 Introduction

The 2024 EP elections resulted in significant shifts in party balance and a notable decline in the turnout of young people, as we discussed in the introduction and will explore in detail in this chapter. The 2024 EP elections also revealed an intensified use of online campaigning tools and strategies across the political spectrum. Political actors have increasingly recognised the importance of digital engagement, with far-right parties particularly skilful in leveraging platforms like TikTok to attract and mobilise young supporters.<sup>21</sup> These parties often use visually engaging, emotionally charged content that resonates with younger audiences, drawing them into their political narratives with striking efficiency. This shift to social media is significant, as digital platforms – and online information sources in general – now play a much more prominent role in shaping political discourse and influencing voter behaviour than even just a few years ago. In this new landscape, social media strategies have become essential not just for reaching younger demographics, but for driving higher engagement and shaping public opinion in ways that traditional campaign methods cannot. As political actors refine

these digital approaches, the role of social media in electoral politics is likely to continue growing, making it a crucial area for future research and regulation.<sup>22</sup>

Considering the increasing significance of social media in the lives of young people, this chapter explores a critical question: how did political parties attempt to engage young voters on social media in the lead up to the 2024 European elections? Furthermore, it examines which strategies proved more effective in capturing attention and fostering engagement among young audiences on these digital platforms. By analysing the varied approaches and levels of success, we aim to uncover insights into how political messaging resonates with younger demographics in the evolving landscape of online campaigning.

## Methodology

We analysed social media posts on Instagram and Facebook to identify key themes, the emotional tone of online conversations and messaging strategies. The platforms were selected based on public data accessibility, which enabled an automatic, text-generated analysis.

**Country selection:** we used a pragmatic approach of using the parameters of equal geographic distribution representative of all European regions: German; Hungary; Poland; and Sweden.<sup>23</sup> We opted for countries with larger populations, so our sample sizes are significant. Furthermore, we looked for different competition dynamics at the party group level. For instance, we were interested in countries where the far right is claimed to be strong at targeting young voters and combining this with countries where green (GER) and conservative (HUN) parties are apparently strong at reaching young voters. As a reference group, we consistently monitored social democratic parties in all selected countries.

### National parties monitored:

Country	Party	Acronym	EP group (new group in brackets)
GER	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD	ID (ESN)
GER	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD	S&D
GER	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne	Green/EFA
GER	Christdemokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union	CDU/CSU	EPP
SWE	Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti	SAP	S&D
SWE	Moderaterna	M	EPP
SWE	Sverigedemokraterna	SD	ECR
HUN	Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség	Fidesz	NA (Pfe)
HUN	Tisza	TISZA	NA (EPP)
HUN	Democratic Coalition/Magyar Szocialista Párt	DK/MSZP	S&D
HUN	Mi Hazánk Mozgalom	MHM	NA (ESN)
POL	Koalicja Obywatelska	KO	EPP
POL	Lewica	Lewica	S&D
POL	Konfederacja	Konfederacja	NA (ESN)

**Data collection:** our project partner Democracy Reporting International (DRI) helped us gather the database for this research by using CrowdTangle to collect data from Instagram and Facebook between 1 March and 15 June 2024 following three steps.

1. We gathered posts from a range of party accounts, including official party accounts of the party leadership candidates running in the European elections in electable positions and party accounts of the young people's wing.
2. We filtered our collection of posts to identify posts related to the EP elections using a keyword list developed by DRI.
3. We further filtered the data to find posts targeting young voters, using a separate keyword list. This list included single-phrase keywords and combinations like "apprenticeship", "birthrate", "brain drain", "civic service" AND "young".

**Spin-off:** the project included a separate qualitative analysis of the TikTok election campaigns of our monitored parties in Germany.<sup>24</sup>

**Data analysis:** we translated the selected young-people-related posts into English for standardised analysis. Using BER-Topic – an unsupervised machine-learning approach for automatically identifying key themes and narratives in large text corpora – we analysed social media posts referencing young voters or topics related to young people to uncover the dominant themes. Sentiment analysis evaluated the emotional tone of these posts, while engagement analysis assessed audience interactions. Note that the voting age for European elections differs slightly in Germany (16 years old) compared to our other country cases, which might partly explain different dynamics there.

## 2.2 Data analysis

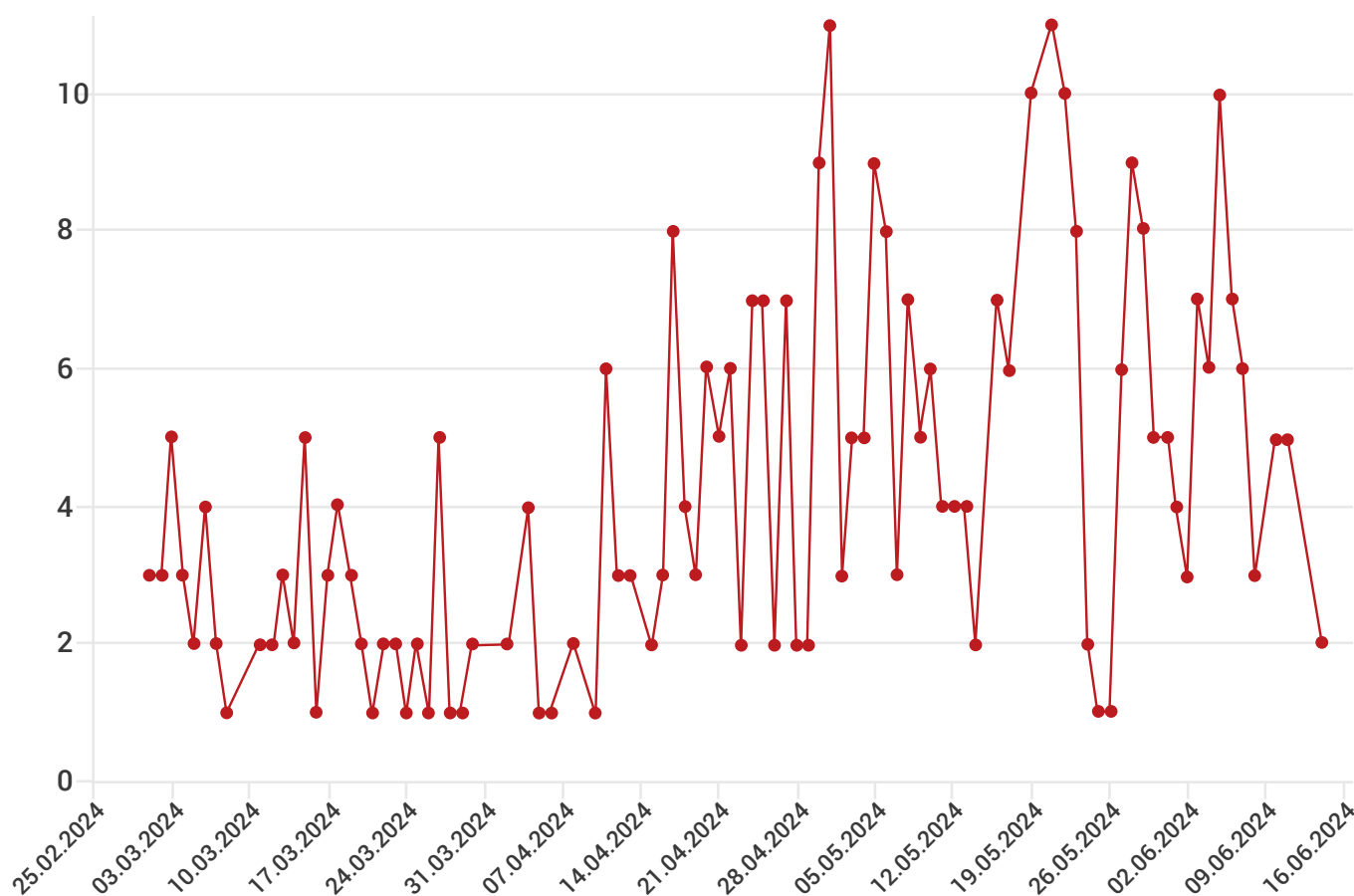
Around 10.6% of all posts related to the EP elections were directed at young voters (389 out of 3,665). As expected, the total number of posts targeting young people increased as the European elections (6-9 June) approached. This rise was not linear but reflected a general uptick in posts related to the 2024 European elections as the vote drew nearer (Figure 9). The highest number of posts (11) was recorded on 1 May and 21 May 2024. Among the top-20 most active accounts, István Ujhelyi of the Socialist Party (MSZP) led with 20 posts, just before the official account of Poland's extreme-right party Konfederacja (19 posts).

Social democratic (132 posts), far-right (113) and conservative parties (64) had the highest absolute

number of posts in our sample, partly due to our focus on these party families and the number of accounts monitored. In contrast, green (33), liberal (24) and other actors (23) targeted young voters significantly less. When considering the share of their total social media posts aimed at young voters, social democrats led with 14.8%, followed by the greens with 12.79%, while conservative and far-right actors had the lowest share of 8.3% and 8.5%, respectively.

Furthermore, we observed significant differences in the social media targeting of young voters across countries (Figure 10). Hungarian (157) and German (110) politicians and party accounts were the most active at targeting young voters, while Swedish (43) were the least active in our sample. The scale of these differences suggests they might not be only due to chance, differences in platform importance

**Figure 9. Social media posts related to EP elections directed at young people.**

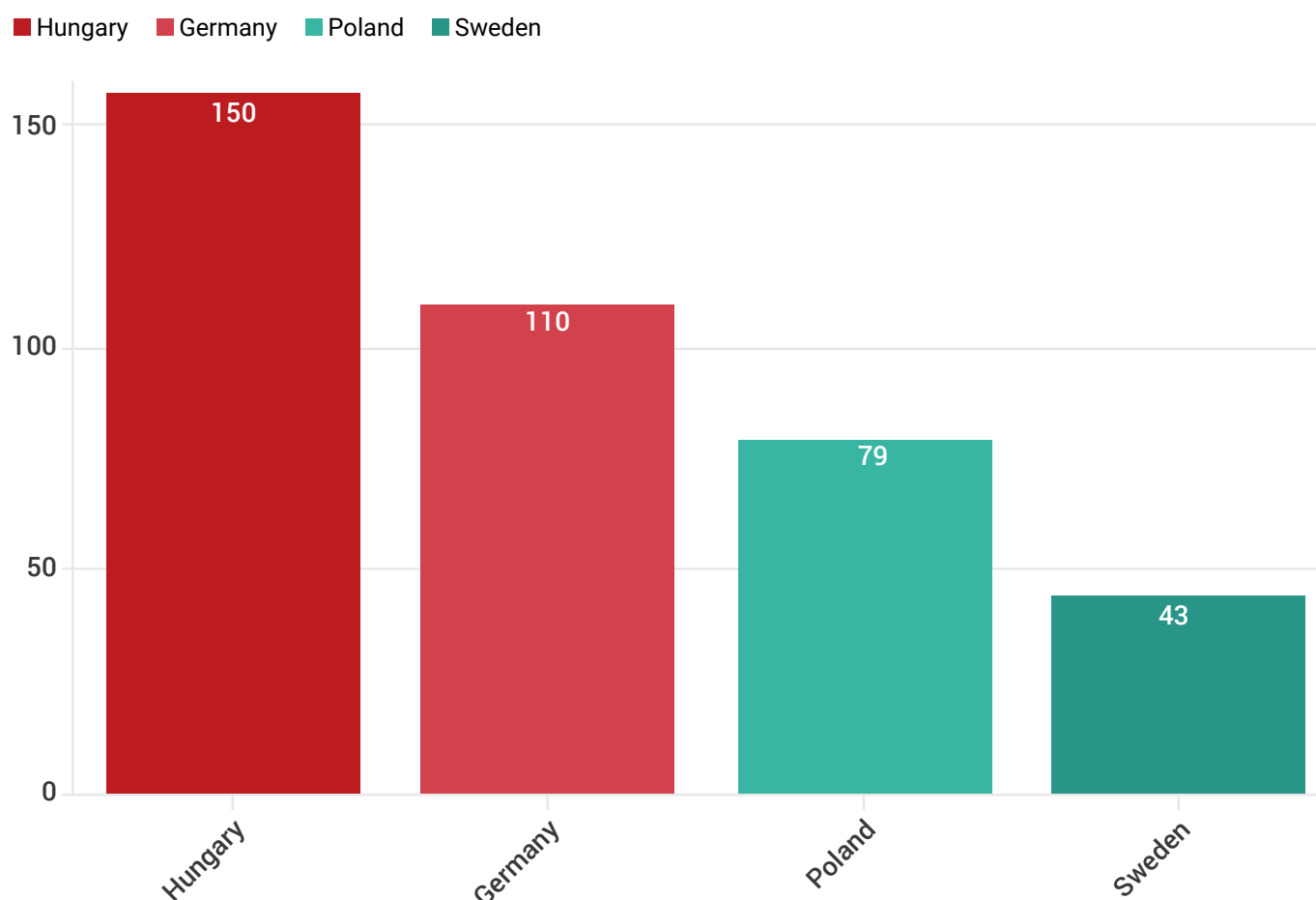


by country or the slightly varying number of accounts analysed per country. Instead, the number of posts is likely also an indicator of the importance that political parties in the individual countries attach to young voters by addressing them more or less frequently on Instagram and Facebook.

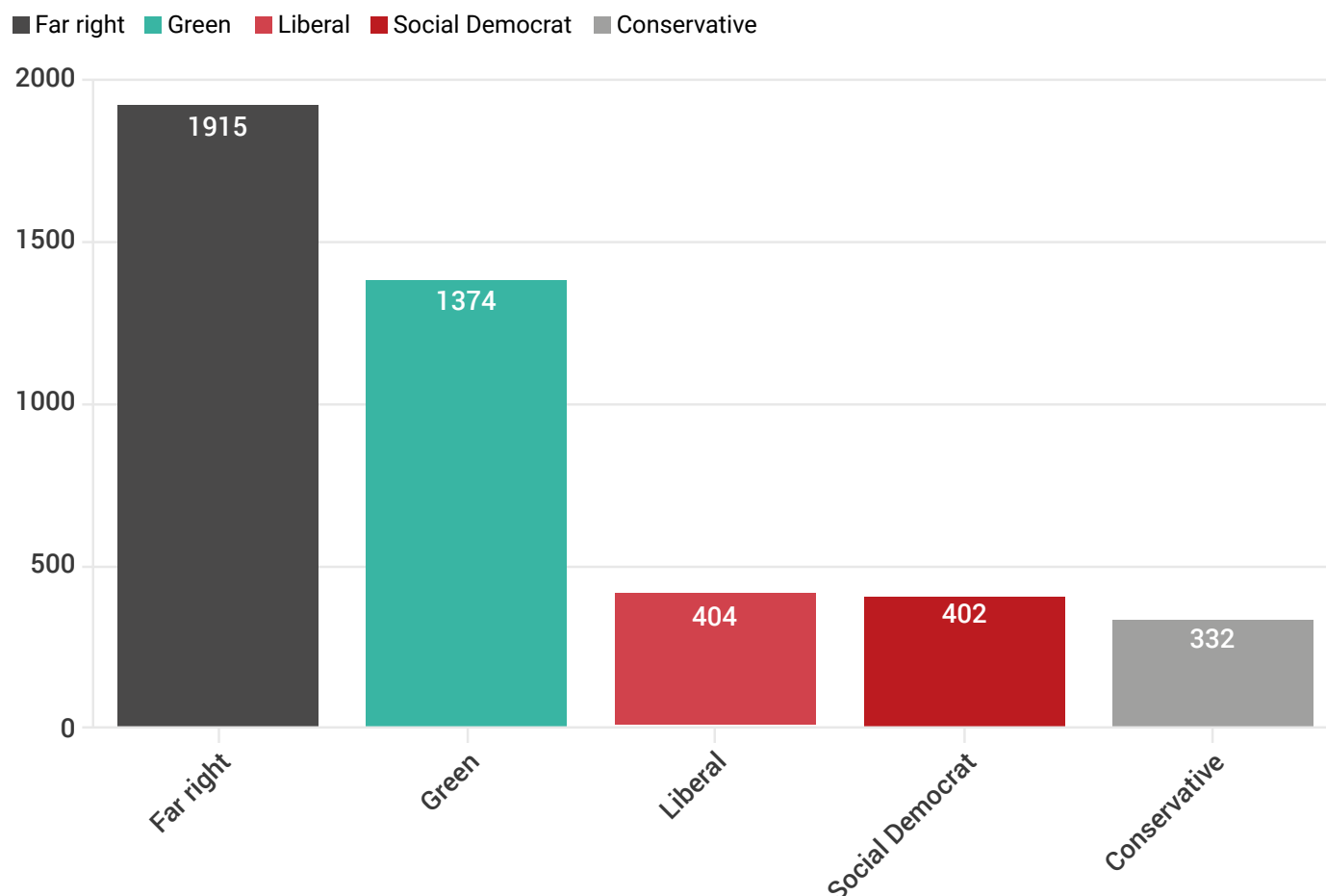
While addressing young voters is the supply aspect of the equation, measuring whether these posts were actually liked, shared or commented on – our definition of measuring engagement on social media – gives a better idea of whether people were

actually taking an interest in these posts. The highest engagement for posts related to young people we found with the far-right Swedish Democrats, followed by AfD in Germany and Konfederacja in Poland. Far-right parties led in engagement in every country we examined (Figure 11). Overall, far-right parties were trailed in engagement by green parties. Posts by conservative, liberal and social democratic parties, on the other hand, attracted the least engagement on average.

**Figure 10. Number of social media posts targeting young people by country.**



**Figure 11. Average interaction with social media posts targeting young people by political ideology.**



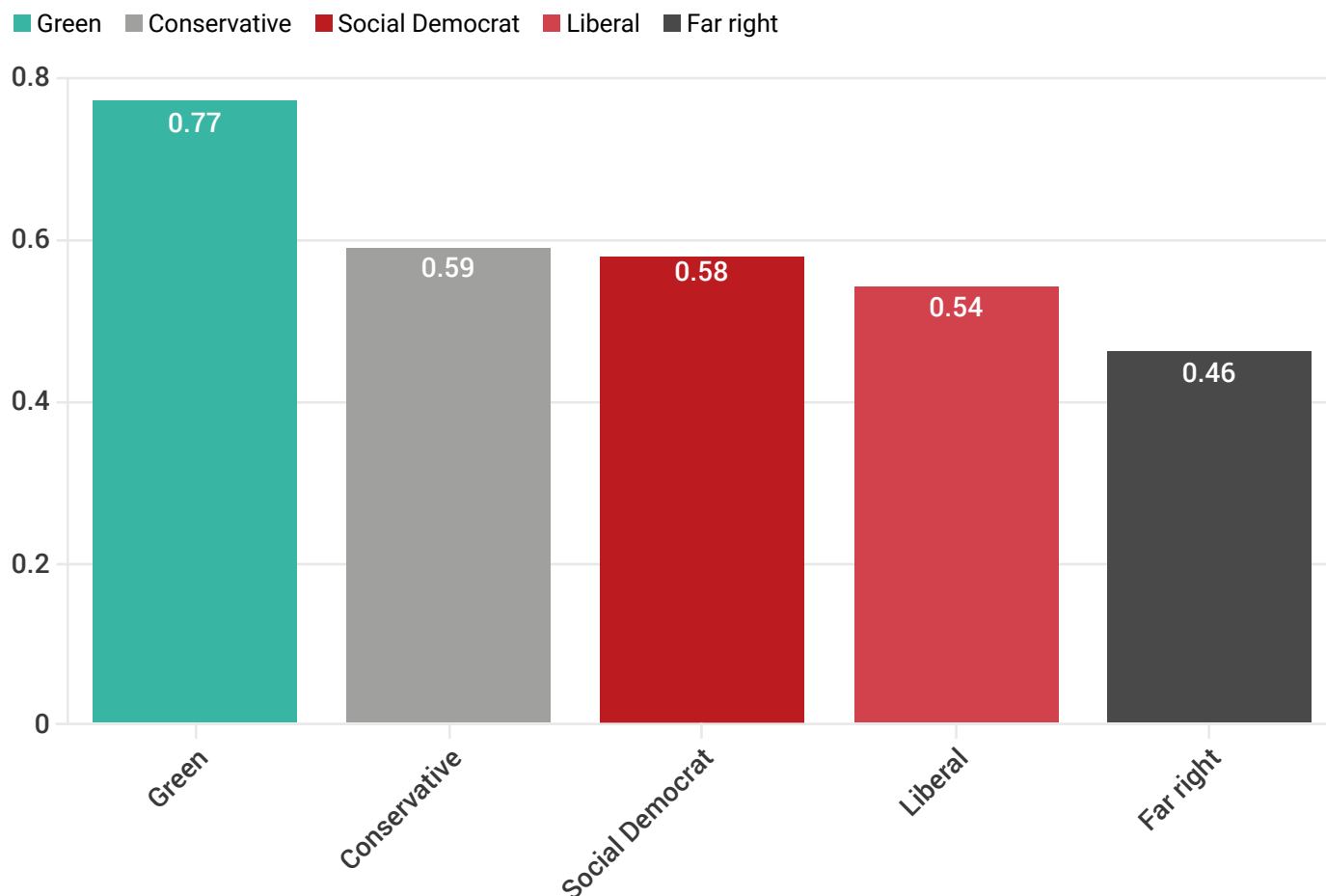
### 2.3 Sentiment analysis

To better understand which posts garnered more interaction – that is, create engagement, as defined above – we examined the relationship between their emotional tone (positive, negative or neutral) and political ideology. This often-used method in social media research, called sentiment analysis, allowed us to obtain sentiment scores ranging from -1 to 1, with -1 indicating very negative and 1 indicating very positive sentiment (Figure 12).

Although our analysis did not find a statistically significant relationship between post sentiment and total interactions, our data indicates that far-right actors tended to produce the most negative content.<sup>25</sup> Notably, these actors, in almost all cases,

also received the highest average engagement with their posts. Given that our findings lacked statistical significance – likely due to our limited sample size – it is important to consider broader datasets to assess how negative content influences engagement. Our analysis focused solely on post sentiment and did not examine the use of “toxic language” – language that is rude, disrespectful or unreasonable and likely to make someone leave the discussion.<sup>26</sup> However, our project partner DRI incorporated this aspect into their broader social media monitoring of the campaigns of political parties related to the 2024 European elections, extending beyond posts aimed specifically at young audiences.<sup>27</sup> Their findings reveal that Instagram and Facebook posts containing toxic content generated more interactions. Taken together, these results suggest that the engagement success of far-right

**Figure 12. Average sentiment score by ideology on a scale from -1 (very negative) to 1 (very positive).**



actors may be linked to their use of negative and toxic content, highlighting the significant role such strategies play in driving social media interactions. These findings align with earlier research showing that negative content and news on social media tends to be shared more widely, thereby rewarding users who produce such material.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.4 Topics and narratives: A national story

European elections are still largely shaped by national contexts, and this is reflected in the respective election campaigns. To better understand the topics and narratives at play in each country, we analysed them on a country-by-country basis. Since automated modelling did not provide meaningful insights at this level due to the small sample size,

we opted for a manual approach, reading and coding the content directly. Here is what we found.

### 2.4.1 Germany

Germany ranked second among the four countries monitored in terms of social media posts related to young people, with 110 posts focused on engaging young voters. The posts were relatively evenly distributed across political groups, with each group posting between 22 and 34 times. However, the engagement generated by these posts varied significantly. The far-right AfD achieved the highest average of 3,740 interactions per post, far outpacing other groups; the Greens followed with 922 interactions per post, while the SPD and CDU/CSU trailed with 409 and 159 interactions, respectively.

Notably, the most popular single post also came from the AfD, amassing over 31,000 interactions.

The content focus of each party varied considerably. The CDU/CSU primarily created traditional campaign posts, frequently highlighting mobility programs for young people like Interrail. In contrast, the AfD consistently positioned itself as the “party for young people”, using strong nationalist rhetoric, including a “Germany first” narrative, and responding aggressively to media scrutiny, especially an investigative report detailing their plans for mass re-immigration policies if they came to power.<sup>29</sup>

The Greens, meanwhile, emphasised mobility issues for young people, such as Interrail, and frequently referenced the EU’s four freedoms, tying these themes to their core issue of climate change. Posts often highlighted climate change’s impact on younger generations and celebrated the lowering of the voting age to 16, framing it as an opportunity for progressive voices to shape the future.

The SPD also discussed climate change but focused on presenting their vision for the EU’s future. Unique among the parties, the SPD warned of the risks associated with rising far-right influence, emphasising the potential dangers for both young people and the broader population.

## 2.4.2 Hungary

Hungary emerged as the leader in social media posts targeting young people, with a total of 157 entries, primarily from the far-right Homeland Party and the social democrats (MSZP/DK). However, despite this high volume, engagement rates were relatively low, indicating that a large quantity of posts did not necessarily translate into high interaction. Notably, Peter Magyar of the Tisza party – an emerging centre-right figure – achieved the highest engagement per post, outperforming the established Green and other parties. In contrast, the most active posts from both the social democrats and the Homeland Party generated notably low levels of engagement.

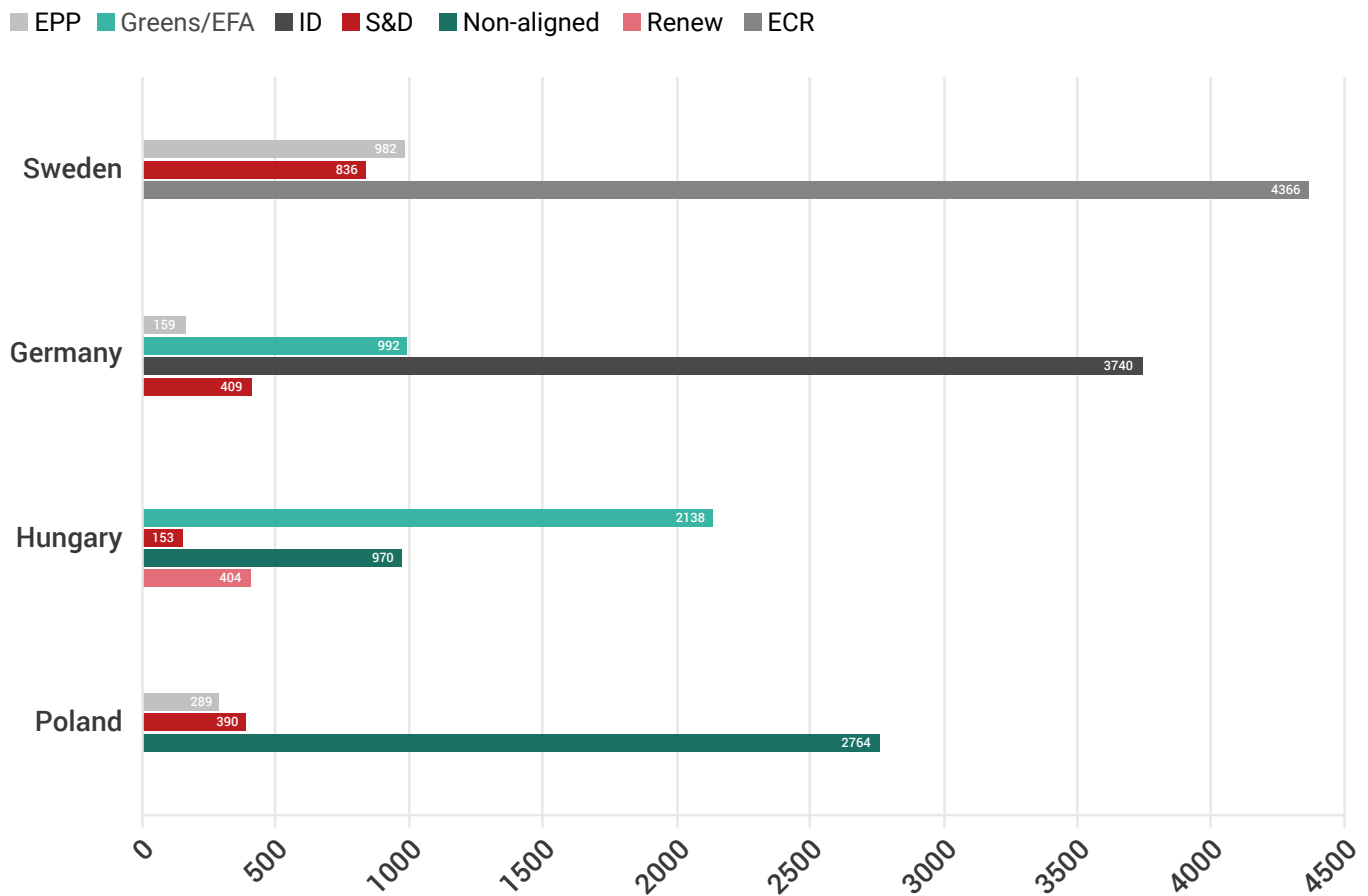
The economy was a central theme across parties, with discussions focusing on EU fund allocation, public investment, youth employment and education. Campaign messaging frequently included criticisms of political opponents. Women’s rights and gender equality also emerged as central topics in the debate. Politicians from Momentum and MSZP shared posts advocating for stronger protections of women’s and girls’ physical and mental health, with a particular focus on reproductive health. In contrast, representatives from Fidesz voiced opposition to the growing influence of “gender ideology” in their posts.

Peter Magyar’s posts, though few, drew significant engagement by targeting the government with pointed critiques. Previously recognised mainly as the former justice minister’s ex-husband, Magyar has now become a significant challenger to the ruling Fidesz party, aided by his recently formed Tisza party. Tisza’s rapid ascent can be partially attributed to its success in mobilising young Hungarians.<sup>30</sup>

The ruling Fidesz party also produced a high volume of posts, primarily emphasising family policies, economic stability and peace, but these posts generally attracted limited interaction. Meanwhile, the social democrats presented a broad range of topics in their posts, with a strong emphasis on young people’s mobilisation, although they focused less on anti-corruption messaging than other parties. This suggests a strategic variation among parties in targeting young voters, with some emphasising economic opportunities and critique of governance, while others highlight social policies and national stability.



**Figure 13. Average interaction with a party family by country.**



**Note:** Before the election, when the data for this project was collected, Fidesz and Tisza in Hungary and Konfederacja in Poland were non-aligned with EP groups

### 2.4.3 Poland

In Poland, 79 campaign posts targeted at young people positioned the country ahead of Sweden but below Germany and Hungary, in terms of online engagement focused on young people. Among the Polish parties, the social democratic Lewica posted the most young-people-related content, followed by the centre-right Civic Coalition (KO) and the far-right Konfederacja, which produced 20 posts aimed at young people in our sample. Despite Lewica's higher volume, Konfederacja achieved the highest average interaction per post, reflecting strong engagement with their messaging.

Distinct themes emerged across the parties. Lewica emphasised their vision for a socially just and equal EU, framing the EU as a platform for young people's involvement in shaping a progressive future. This approach underscored Lewica's focus on directly addressing young people's issues and promoting active young people's participation. The Civic Coalition's young-people-related content, by contrast, concentrated on family and children's welfare policies, highlighting initiatives to improve these areas.

Konfederacja, with fewer posts but higher engagement, focused heavily on attacking political opponents and questioning the EU's role in delivering economic growth, coupled with strong

anti-migration rhetoric. Their young-people-related content resonated with a segment of young voters attracted to their nationalist and Eurosceptic messages, indicating a strategic focus on mobilising disillusionment with the EU and concerns over economic issues. This varied approach among parties suggests differing strategies in appealing to young voters, from fostering EU-oriented progressive visions to capitalising on economic and nationalist sentiments.

#### 2.4.4 Sweden

In Sweden's 2024 European election campaign, political parties exhibited relatively low social media activity targeting young people, with only 43 posts analysed across three main parties. The Social Democratic Party of Sweden (SAP) was the most active, contributing 27 posts, followed by the centre-right Moderatana party with ten posts and the far-right Sweden Democrats (SD) with six posts. Despite posting less frequently, the SD achieved significantly higher average engagement per post (4,366 interactions) compared to SAP (836) and Moderatana (982). The SD also had the most engaging single post, accumulating 9,528 interactions.

The predominant theme among all parties was campaign events, accounting for half of the posts. These typically included reflections on daily campaign activities, such as visits to schools and young people's institutions but seldom delved into broader campaign issues. The SAP uniquely focused on young people in their messaging, with their posts explicitly encouraging young people to vote or support young candidates. These appeals were primarily disseminated through the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League and occasionally tied to traditional social democratic priorities like free education and social cohesion.

Moderatana's content related to young people was minimal. Their young-people-focused posts featured politicians engaging with university students, launching young people's campaigns and discussing mental health support for the younger demographic.

However, due to the small number of posts, definitive conclusions about their engagement strategy for young people are limited.

While the SD achieved high engagement rates, they had few posts targeting young voters. Their most engaging content centred on themes like national sovereignty, strict immigration policies and security concerns, often only mentioning young people in passing, not as the core part of their message.

## 2.5 Discussion

Our results show that, throughout the campaigns on Facebook and Instagram, political parties often mentioned young people in the context of general campaign events, calls for young people to vote or posts criticising political opponents. Beyond these general references, young-people-related posts covered a variety of topics without any overarching pattern across countries, including the economy, EU fund allocation and women's rights. However, these posts were frequently very general, treating "young people" as a monolithic group rather than targeting specific subgroups within the young demographic.

Furthermore, the findings of our analysis indicate that simply increasing the volume of young-people-related posts does not lead to higher engagement – more posts do not necessarily translate into greater impact. Comparing the parties in our analysis reveals a pattern: social democratic parties attempt to reach a wide audience of young voters in absolute numbers and relative to their overall campaign post. The greens also put a large relative emphasise on their posts for young people. Yet, the frequency of young-people-related posts was not always reflected in engagement levels. Far-right parties achieved the highest average engagement on young-people-focused posts, with the Greens following them, while social democrats and conservatives lagged behind in terms of interactions. This suggests that targeted strategies may be more effective than broad outreach alone in engaging young audiences on social media.

While our social media analysis focused on Facebook and Instagram, our qualitative analysis

of TikTok in Germany tells a similar story. AfD achieved significantly higher interactions than the other parties with slightly fewer posts. This disparity may have contributed to the AfD making the strongest gains among voters under 30 in the European elections.<sup>31</sup> Unlike other parties, the AfD also outsourced content<sup>32</sup> distribution to fans and followers, addressing young voters in a more direct and engaging manner. It's also possible that posts not specifically targeted at young people resonated with them, leading to substantial reach and interactions within this demographic.

Moreover, while our analysis did not find a statistically significant link between post sentiment and the number of interactions, broader findings on toxic language in political campaigns leading up to the European elections suggest that posts on Instagram and Facebook containing toxic content tend to receive higher engagement. This points to a broader pattern in which toxic and negative posts are often rewarded with increased interactions. There are at least two avenues that may explain this reward; both may be true simultaneously but require different strategies to address them. Firstly, these messages may resonate because extremist positions have, alarmingly, become more widespread across the general population – including the youngest age groups – even among supporters of traditionally democratic parties, as the previous chapter highlighted. Additionally, as studied by others,<sup>33 34</sup> social media algorithms are designed to prioritise highly engaging content, amplifying it to larger audiences. This mechanism can create a vicious cycle, giving toxic and polarising content a significant advantage in reaching and influencing more users.

The first challenge arises from democratic parties' frequent shortcomings in meeting young people's demands for concrete proposals and forward-looking narratives that address widespread discontent, as evidenced in our social media analysis. This gap enables far-right parties to exploit dissatisfaction by offering simplistic, often nostalgic, solutions to contemporary issues. The second challenge is both principled and structural. On a principled level, hate and toxicity undermine the

foundations of liberal democratic discourse, which relies on respectful competition between political ideas. Extremist and hateful content erodes this essential respect. While the DSA mandates regular audits of platforms, including audits of hate speech, its effective implementation hinges on empowering each member state's Digital Services Coordinator (DSC), tasked with overseeing its enforcement. This requires strengthening DSCs through targeted capacity-building initiatives, including training and resource provision, as well as raising public awareness about citizens' rights under the DSA.<sup>35</sup>

Far-right parties have effectively exploited the design of social media platforms, which tend to amplify negative and toxic content, to drive higher levels of engagement.

Our research, in this context, contributes to a broader understanding of the factors behind the far right's high levels of social media engagement. These factors, explored by others, likely extend to their messaging on young people as well.<sup>36</sup>

1. Resource investment: investing in digital communication with substantial funds and technology, using professional studios and early platform adoption.
2. Journalism replacement: offering digital content as an alternative to mainstream media, aiming to become the primary news source.
3. Counter-public creation: networking politicians and activists who act like influencers to coordinate campaigns.
4. Collective identity: fostering a strong "we" feeling, emphasising cultural unity and leveraging emotions for group cohesion.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter departed from the question of how political parties used social media to engage young voters in the lead up to the 2024 EP elections and focused on which strategies were most effective at capturing young people's engagement. Key findings include:

- With social media's growing importance among young people, parties aimed to attract this demographic, but approaches varied in effectiveness and reach.
- Around 10.6% of all posts related to the EP elections were directed at young voters. Social democratic, far-right and conservative parties posted the highest number of young-people-related content. When looking at the share of their posts specifically targeting young people, our results show that social democrats (14.8%) had the highest share, followed by the Greens (12.8%). Far-right and conservative parties directed a much smaller portion of their posts to young people, at 8.5% and 8.3%, respectively.
- Our findings indicate that post frequency did not correlate directly with engagement levels. Far-right parties, despite having fewer young-people-focused posts, achieved significantly higher engagement per post compared to other groups.
- Significant differences emerged across countries in terms of engagement with young people:
  - In **Germany**, the far-right AfD focused heavily on young voters with prominent, high-engagement campaigns.
  - In **Poland**, while left-leaning Lewica produced the most young-people-oriented posts, far-right Konfederacja achieved the highest engagement, despite fewer posts.
  - **Hungary** led in social media posts targeting young people, with the far-right Homeland Party and social democrats dominating in

quantity, though engagement remained low overall. In contrast, Peter Magyar of the Tisza party achieved the highest engagement per post, leveraging sharp government critiques and appealing to young voters, positioning his party as a rising challenge to Fidesz.

- In **Sweden**, the SAP was the primary contributor of young-people-related content.
- Regarding the sentiment of social media posts, while our analysis did not find a statistical correlation between sentiment and engagement, it did reveal a notable pattern: far-right parties, which posted the highest proportion of negative content, consistently achieved the highest engagement levels. Broader findings on toxic language in campaigns further supported this trend, showing that posts with toxic content attracted more interactions. This suggests a broader tendency for negative and provocative content on social media to garner higher engagement.
- In terms of the content, young-people-oriented posts often addressed broad campaign events, calls for young people's participation or critiques of political opponents. Topics varied widely – such as the economy, EU funds and women's rights – but were often presented in ways that treated young people as a single demographic rather than as distinct subgroups with varied interests.

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## **3. TURNING OUT OR TUNING OUT:**

HOW AND WHY YOUNG  
PEOPLE VOTED IN THE  
2024 EP ELECTIONS

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# 3. TURNING OUT OR TUNING OUT: HOW AND WHY YOUNG PEOPLE VOTED IN THE 2024 EP ELECTIONS

Authors: Ognjan Denkovski, Miriam Candelù, Michael Jennewein

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of data on the voting behaviour of young people, focusing on individuals aged 15-24 across our main case-study countries: Sweden; Germany; Poland; and Hungary. It examines voter turnout, party preferences, and the underlying motivations for both voting and abstention.

### Methods

The data used in this chapter stems from the Eurobarometer post-electoral survey (EPES) published in September 2024.<sup>37</sup> The data collection period ran from June to July 2024 directly after the EP elections. For the party preference vote, we show both the age-disaggregated vote share for eligible voters aged 15-24 and the overall support among the general population for comparison. The party preference data suffered from occasional low numbers of respondents. We thus opted to show secondary data from high-quality exit polls whenever the respondent number was zero. This was applied in two instances: we used the media exit poll data for the young people’s vote for D-MKSZ-P in Hungary and the STV exit poll data for the young people’s vote share for the SD in Sweden.

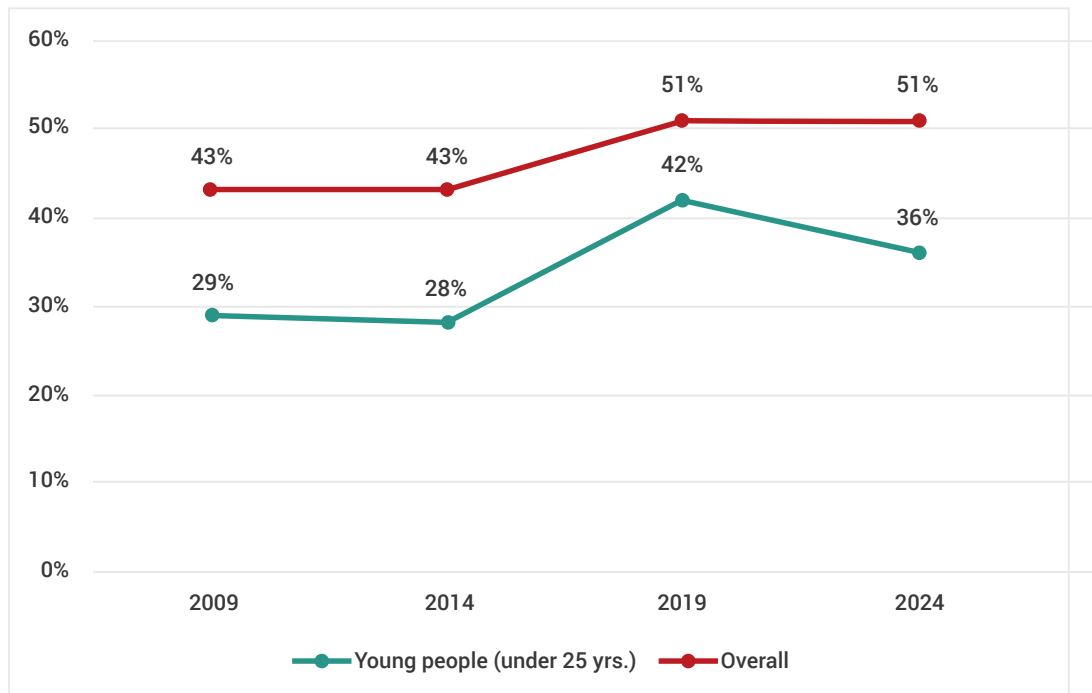
## 3.2 Turnout among young people

The overall turnout in the 2024 EP election was 50.7%, virtually the same as in 2019 (50.6%). 2019 constituted an eight-point increase, pushing EP election turnout numbers over the 50% mark for the first time since 1994. This increase, between 2014 and 2019, was disproportionally driven by young people under 25 (+14 percentage points, pp) and people aged 25-39 (+12pp). It is thus noteworthy that, while overall turnout stayed the same, turnout among young people under 25 dropped 6pp from 42% to 36%.<sup>38</sup> So, while overall turnout stabilised, the turnout of young people went in reverse, albeit staying at higher levels compared to elections before 2019. In 2014 and 2009, the turnout among young people was much lower, just below 30%. However, European elections with a turnout of not even 40% among young voters under 25 are not a cause for celebration given that this is still 15pp behind the overall turnout rate among the general population, and generally a very low number compared to national elections.

When examining our case countries, two stand out with above-average turnout rates for young people: Sweden ranks fifth and Germany sixth EU wide (Figure 15). Hungary is positioned at the median in tenth place, while Poland falls below average, ranking 18th.

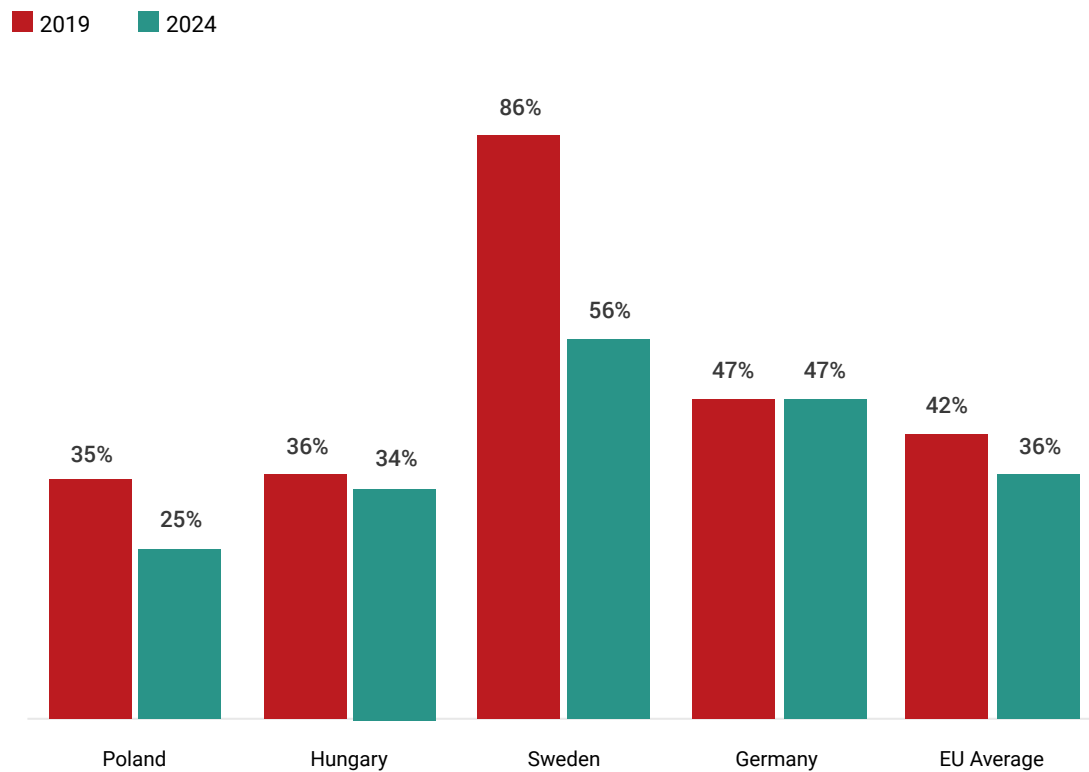
In Sweden, approximately 56% of people aged 15-24 participated in the European elections. While this is high compared to other member states, it marked a staggering 30pp drop from the 2019 record of 86%. In Germany, not even half of eligible young voters voted (47%), exactly the same number as in 2019.

**Figure 14. Turnout of young people and overall turnout since 2009.**



Sources: EPESs 2009, 2014, 2019, 2024

**Figure 15. Turnout of young people in 2019 and 2024 across the case-study countries.**



Source: EPESs 2019 and 2024.



In contrast, Poland demonstrates much lower levels of voting amongst young people, where only 25% of voters aged 15-24 cast ballots. Compared to 2019, this marked a decrease of 10pp and was a far cry from the turnout rate of 75% in the 2023 national election. Hungary falls somewhere in the middle, with 34% of the 15-24 age group who voted, corresponding to a marginal 2% drop compared to 2019.

### 3.2.1 When did young people decide to vote?

Compared to older generations, young people who voted tended to make their decision much later. Among young voters, 29% decided to vote only a few weeks or even days leading up to the election, while only 9% of voters aged 55 and older made such last-minute decisions.

This trend is similar among young people who chose not to vote. A significant portion made their decision close to election day, with 11% deciding not to vote just days before and 21% making the decision on the day of the election itself.

## 3.3 Who did young people vote for?

In the following section, we present the party preference of young voters across the four case-study countries, contrasting them with support among the overall population. To analyse the young people's vote, and comparing it to overall party support, we utilised the EPES data, which aligns with the official election results across all countries. In two instances, when the EPES data had a particularly low number of respondents, we supplemented it with secondary data from exit polls.

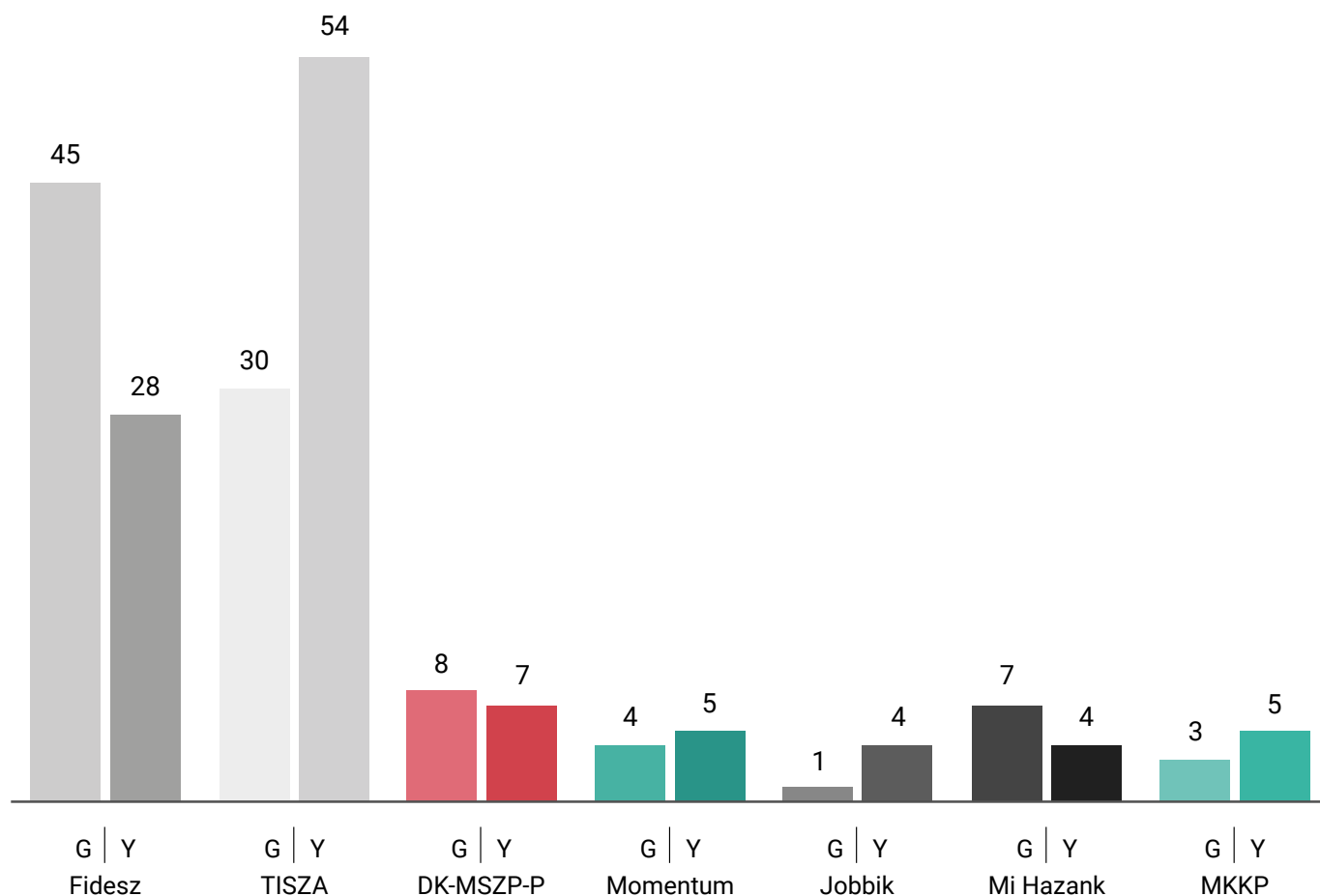
### 3.3.1 Hungary

Hungary experienced a notable shift in the 2024 EP election. The dominant incumbent party, Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, saw a significant drop in support among the overall population – losing 7.8% of its vote share – marking their first substantial decline in years. Despite this, Fidesz maintained overall dominance with 45% of the total vote. The emerging

TISZA party, headed by Fidesz rebel Peter Magyar, capitalised on this shift, securing 30% of the vote in its debut – a remarkable achievement for a single opposition party in Hungary. However, this success came largely at the expense of the traditional opposition parties (Figure 16).<sup>39</sup>

Our results confirm reports that TISZA has support among young voters, with more than half of respondents (54%) backing Magyar.<sup>40</sup> Fidesz came in second among young voters, with 28%, indicating their support compared to 45% in the full vote. The data for support among young people for the social democratic coalition DK/MSZP-P contains uncertainty, as the EPES sample did not include any respondents in the age group 15-24 that voted DK/MSZP-P. Looking at secondary data, it is, however, highly doubtful that this should be interpreted as DK/MSZP-P having literally no support among the young at all. The Median exit poll,<sup>41</sup> for instance, showed 7% support for DK/MSZP-P among people aged 18-29, which roughly corresponds to their overall election result. However, even if we consider the Median data as more accurate, this does not change the fact that TISZA is the most popular party among young people, drawing votes from all centre-left opposition parties and Fidesz to a lesser degree. This is most likely, as observers note,<sup>42</sup> because young (urban) opposition voters' biggest wish is to vote Orbán out of office above all, and they deem Magyar as their best opportunity for a long time to achieve this goal.

**Figure 16. Comparison of support (in %) among the general population and young people in Hungary.**



G: General Population | Y: Young People

**Sources:** EPES 2024 and Median.

**Note:** EPES data is shown except for DK-MSZP-P where Median exit poll data for the Young People is shown instead (Y hence does not add up to 100).

### 3.3.2 Germany

The conservative CDU/CSU decisively won the election with 30% of the vote among the overall population, well ahead of the AfD, who came in second for the first time in history with 16%. The governing parties were trailing with the Social Democrats at 14%, the Greens at 12%, and the liberal FDP at 8% (Figure 17).

Among young people, however, the picture diverges. The union parties CDU/CSU remain the most popular choice among young voters, with 14% support, but

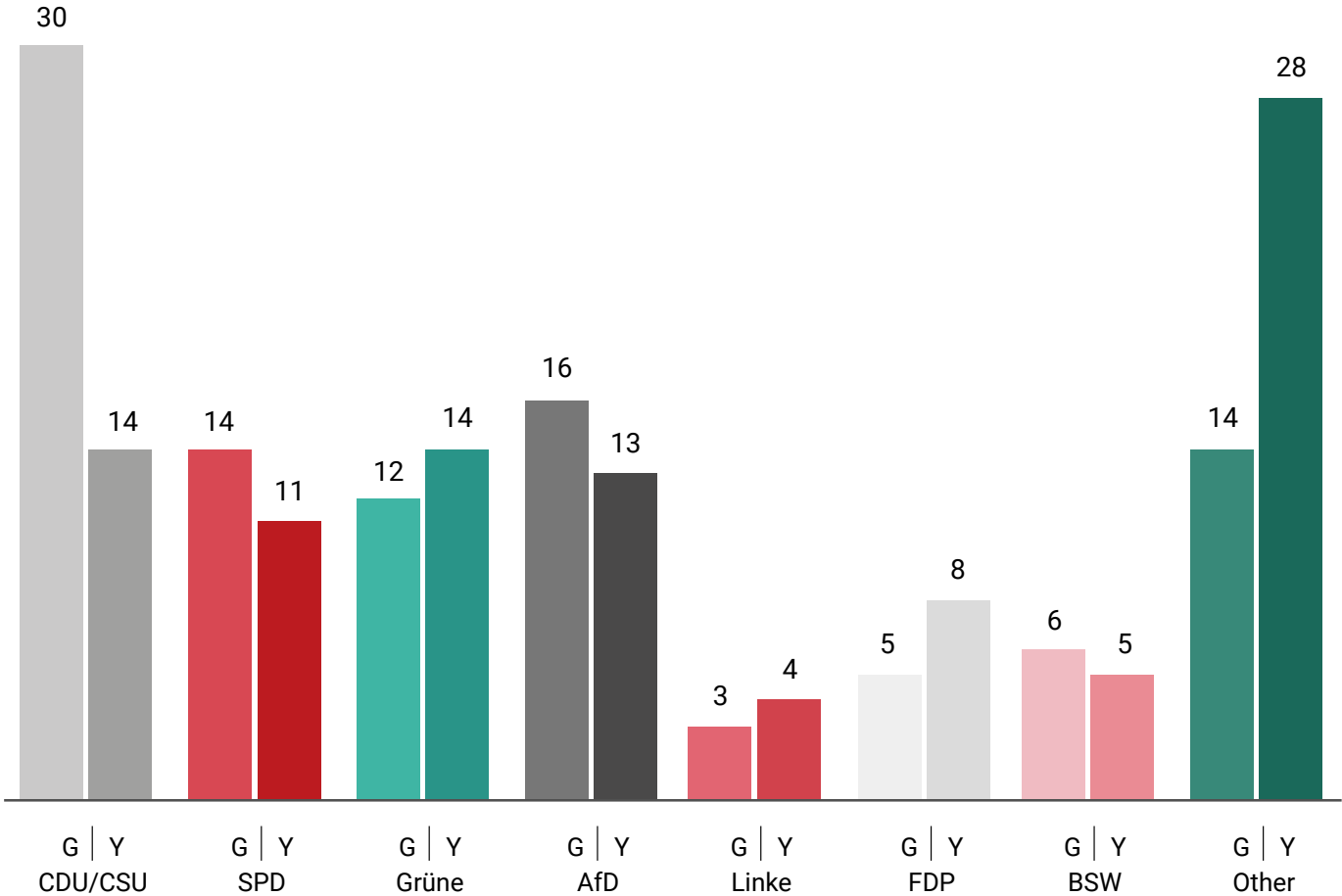
share the number-one spot with the Greens (14%). Both are closely followed by the AfD (13%). For the governing SPD, support among young people (11%) is lower than overall (14%). The reverse is true for the liberal FDP, which received 8% among young voters compared to 5% overall. These results suggest that the CDU/CSU – and the SPD to a lesser degree – have an older electorate than the Greens and the liberals, who enjoy relatively higher support among younger voters. The AfD has also slightly higher support among people aged over 25 but less of an age gap than the conservatives. These findings are also supported when one looks at the InfraTest exit poll,<sup>43</sup> where young people's support for the AfD

is even a little higher (16%), while support for the Greens (11%) and SPD (9%) is slightly lower.

However, the biggest peculiarity of the German young people’s vote is the starkly higher support for smaller – mainly progressive – parties who are not present in the German Bundestag (28%), which is double the support among all voters (14%). This highlights how young German voters gravitate strongly towards supporting progressive and fringe alternatives beyond mainstream parties. The lack of an election threshold in German elections to the EP likely contributes to this voting behaviour, as this creates much less risk of casting a losing vote than in other elections where thresholds of 5% are in place. For instance, both Volt (8% among young people)

and Die Partei (4% among young people) secured seats in the EP, even though they only received 2.5% and 2% of the overall vote, respectively.

**Figure 17. Comparison of support (in %) among the general population and young people in Germany.**



G: General Population | Y: Youth Vote  
**Source:** Eurobarometer Post-Electoral Survey 2024

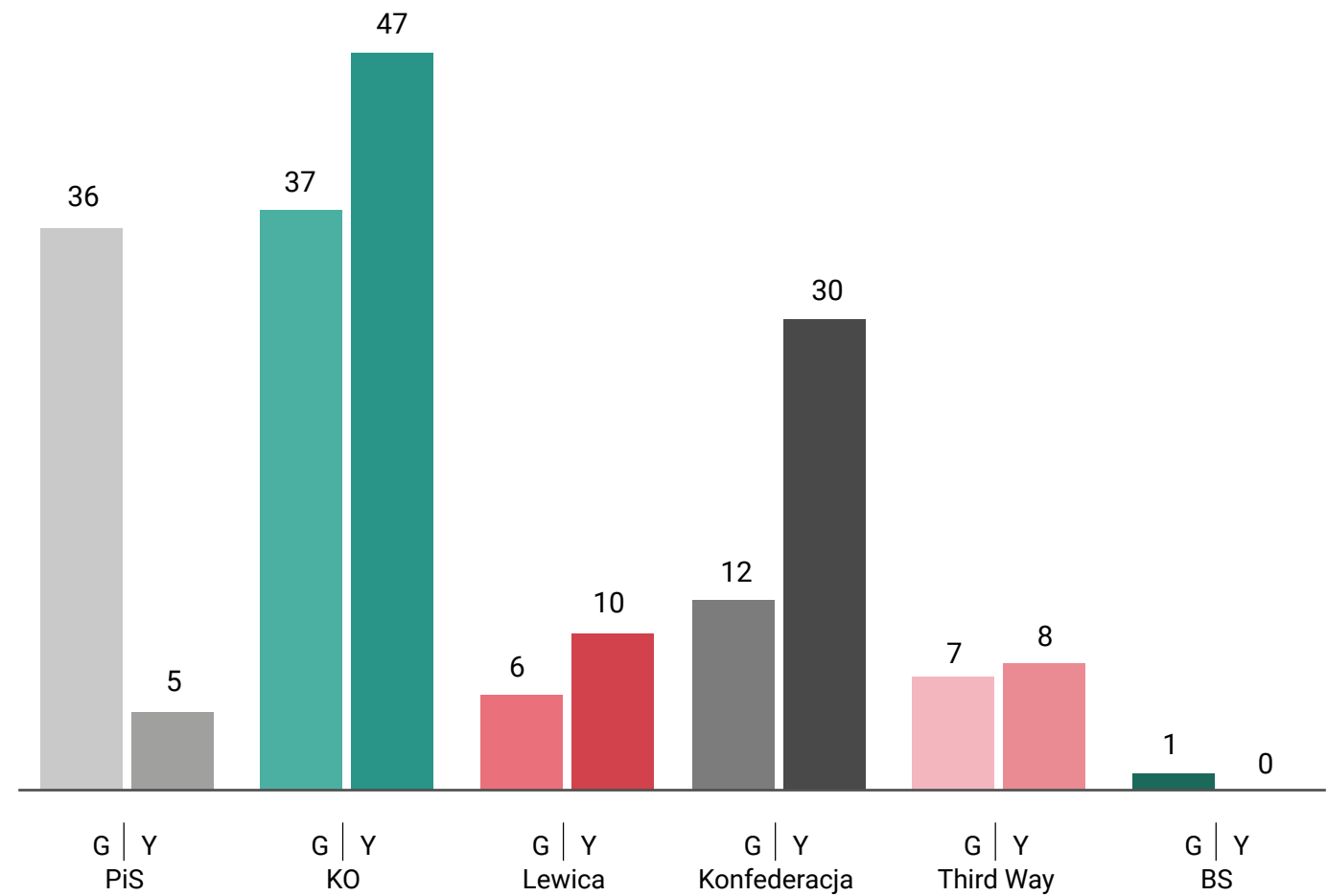
3.3.3 Poland

Since the EP election in Poland could be considered a first test of whether the novel governing coalition since 2023 could maintain their support,<sup>44</sup> it seems reasonable to use the 2023 parliamentary election result as a reference point, notwithstanding differences between European and national elections (Figure 18). Overall, the EP election saw a win for the liberal-conservative KO of Prime Minister Donald Tusk (37%), who narrowly beat the national-conservative former governing PiS (36%). The far-right Konfederacja received 12% of the vote, followed by the centre-right Trzecia Droga at 7% and the social democratic Lewica at 6%. Compared to the 2023 parliamentary election, the result showed

a consolidation of the vote among the KO at the expense of their coalition partners Trzecia Droga and Lewica. The biggest winner in relation to 2023 was Konfederacja, who saw a 5% increase from their 7% 2023 result.

Looking at the young people’s vote, KO received by far the most support, with 47% voting for them. Contrary to the overall support, the second most popular choice among young voters was Konfederacja (30%), which is known to have a strong base among the young, especially young men.<sup>45</sup> This support comes at significant expense of the national-conservative PiS, which is, according to the EPES, widely unpopular among young voters with only 5% support, in contrast to their 36% vote share overall. However, this number might underestimate

Figure 18. Comparison of support (in %) among the general population and young people in Poland.



G: General Population | Y: Youth Vote  
Source: Eurobarometer Post-Electoral Survey 2024

young people’s support for PiS. The European Election Study (EES),<sup>46</sup> for instance, finds 25% of young voters backing PiS, while only 12.5% support Konfederacja, more closely mirroring the overall election result.

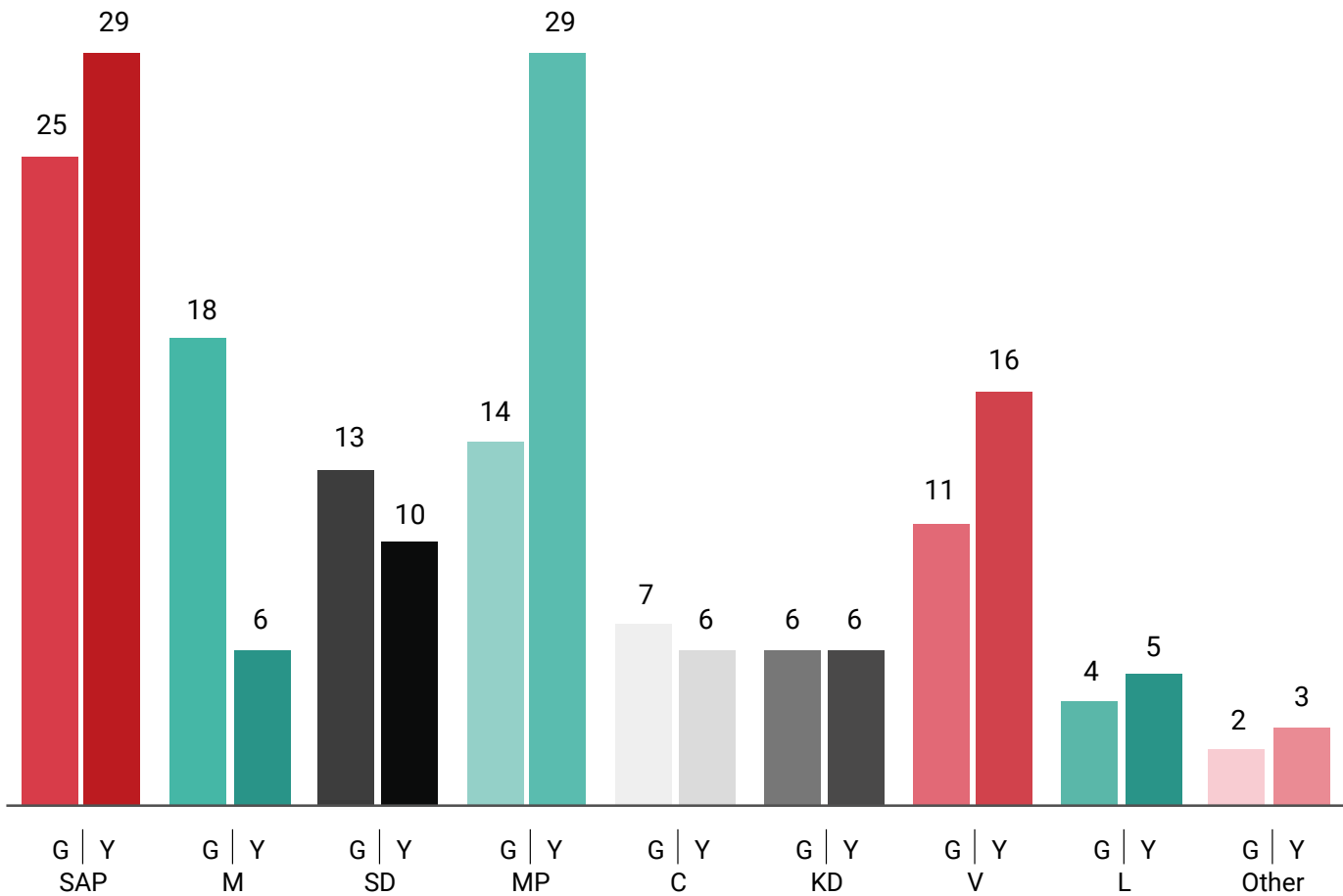
The social democratic Lewica is slightly more popular among the young (10%) than the general population (6%). Trzecia Droga obtained 8% of the young people’s vote and a similar 7% from the overall population. This steady level of support suggests that the party has consistent backing across different demographics, most likely in their strongholds in rural areas.<sup>47</sup>

3.3.4 Sweden

Unlike in many other EU member states, the Swedish EP election result saw a shift to the left as the Green Miljöpartiet (14%) and far-left party Vänsterpartiet (11%) achieved significant gains in support compared to 2019, while right-wing parties lost vote share, most prominently the far-right SD (13%). The social democrats maintained first place with 25% of the vote, followed by the conservative Moderaterna (18%). The remaining centre and liberal parties (C, KD and L) secured between 4% and 7% of the vote (Figure 19).

Among young voters, the parties left of centre dominated, with all of them achieving higher shares

Figure 19. Comparison of support (in %) among the general population and young people in Sweden.



G: General Population | Y: Youth Vote

Source: Eurobarometer Post-Electoral Survey 2024 | STV for Y for SD

\*EPES data is shown except for SD where STV exit poll data for the youth vote (18-21) is shown instead (Y hence does not add up to 100)

among the young than overall. 29% of them voted for social democrats, equally as many for the Greens (29%), a sharply higher number than their overall support (14%). The Left Party (V) also received notable backing from young voters, with 16% support compared to 11% from the overall population. This suggests a stronger inclination toward left-wing politics within the younger demographic than among the general population.

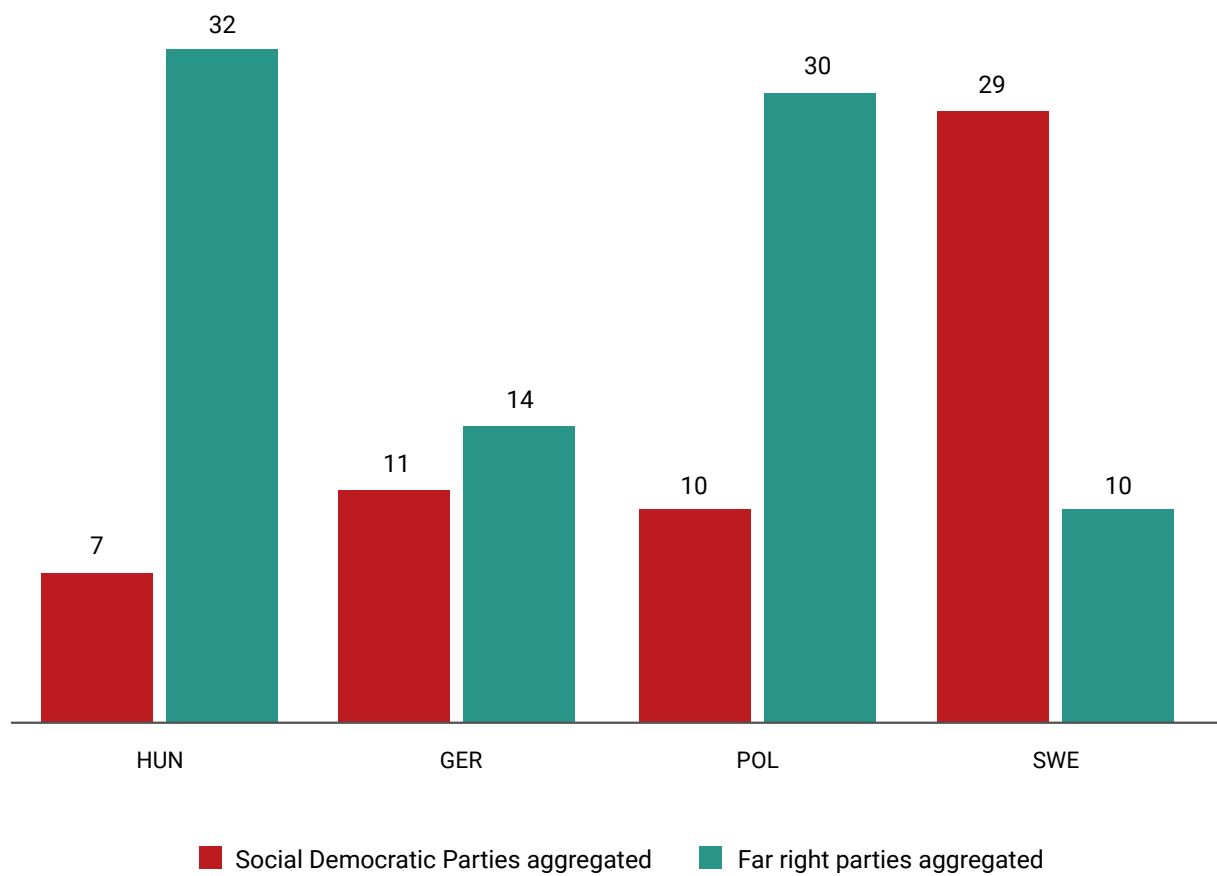
The inverse is true for the parties right of the centre, where the centre-right moderates only received 6%. For the far-right SD, data uncertainty remains, as the Eurobarometer sample has zero respondents among the 18-24 who voted for the SD. Secondary data suggests that support for SD among the young is likely higher. The STV poll has found 15% of 18-21 year olds and 10% of 22-30 year olds voting for

the SD in the EP elections.<sup>48</sup> In turn, the support for social democrats and the Greens is likely a little overestimated in the EPES. Among the smaller centre and liberal parties (C, KD and L), support among the young was the same as that overall (approx. 6%).

3.3.5 A comparison of young people’s votes for social democrats and the far right

Throughout our study, we consistently track the electoral and campaign performances of social democratic and far-right parties (Figure 20). Here, we take a comparative look at how each of these parties fares in relation to young voters. Across three of our four case-study countries, the far right enjoys clearly higher support among young voters than the social democrats. The notable exception is Sweden, which not only had the highest support

Figure 20. Comparison of support for social democrats and the far right among young voters.



Source: EPES 2024, except for far right in Sweden, where STV exit poll data is shown instead.

among social democrats in all our countries, but a much lower support among the far right, at 10%. This lies in stark contrast to the strong support for the far right among the young voters in Poland and Hungary. In both, the main opposition to the far right for young voters is not the social democrats but centre-right parties (KO and Tisza). In Germany, the far right is also ahead in support among the young, albeit to a lesser degree than in the other countries. Concerning the support of the far right by young people, there are clear differences between parties that are, or until recently were, in government (Fidesz, PiS) and those that are not. The former score much worse among young people than among the overall population, likely because they cannot present themselves as anti-system or as a refreshing alternative. In contrast, parties that can portray themselves this way – and that place particular emphasis on engaging young people through social media, as we shall later show (Konfederacja, AfD) – enjoy greater support among young voters, compared to older ones.

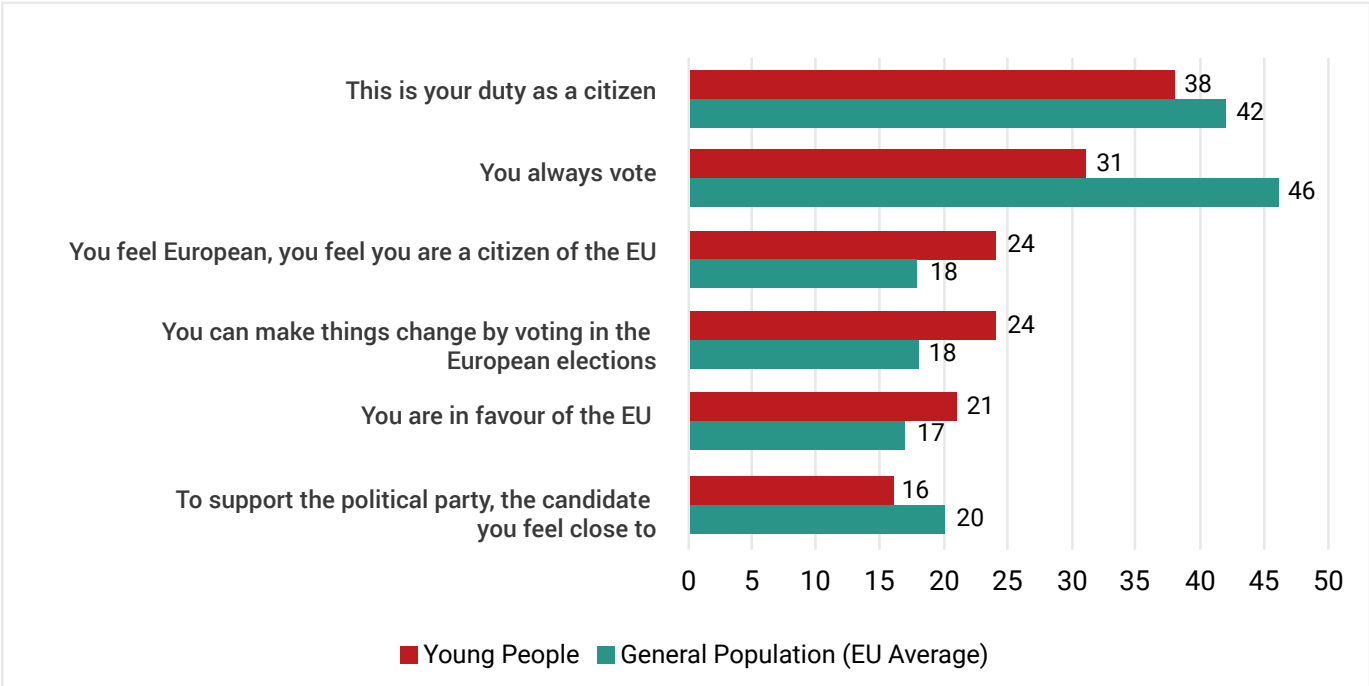
3.4 Motivations<sup>49</sup>

3.4.1 Motivations for young people to vote

Across the EU, the main reason for young people to vote in the 2024 European election was that they perceived it as their duty as citizens (38%) to do so (Figure 21). This is not far off from the population average of 42%, where this answer comes second. The second most important reason chosen by those aged under 25 to vote was that they always vote (31%). Unsurprisingly, due to age (and this being the first election for many), this was substantially lower than the population average of 46%, where this answer comes first overall. Young people were also less likely to be motivated by their support for a candidate or a party as reasons to vote (16%) than the overall population (20%).

The reasons young people find more important as factors for voting than older voters are those that are linked to a positive image of the EU. Examples include being in favour of the EU, as cited by 21% of the young and 17% of the average population. Along

Figure 21. The main reasons for deciding to vote in European elections (in %).



Source: Eurobarometer Post-Electoral Survey 2024



the same lines, the question “You feel European; you feel you are a citizen of the EU” gained 24% support among the youngest and only 18% for the average population.

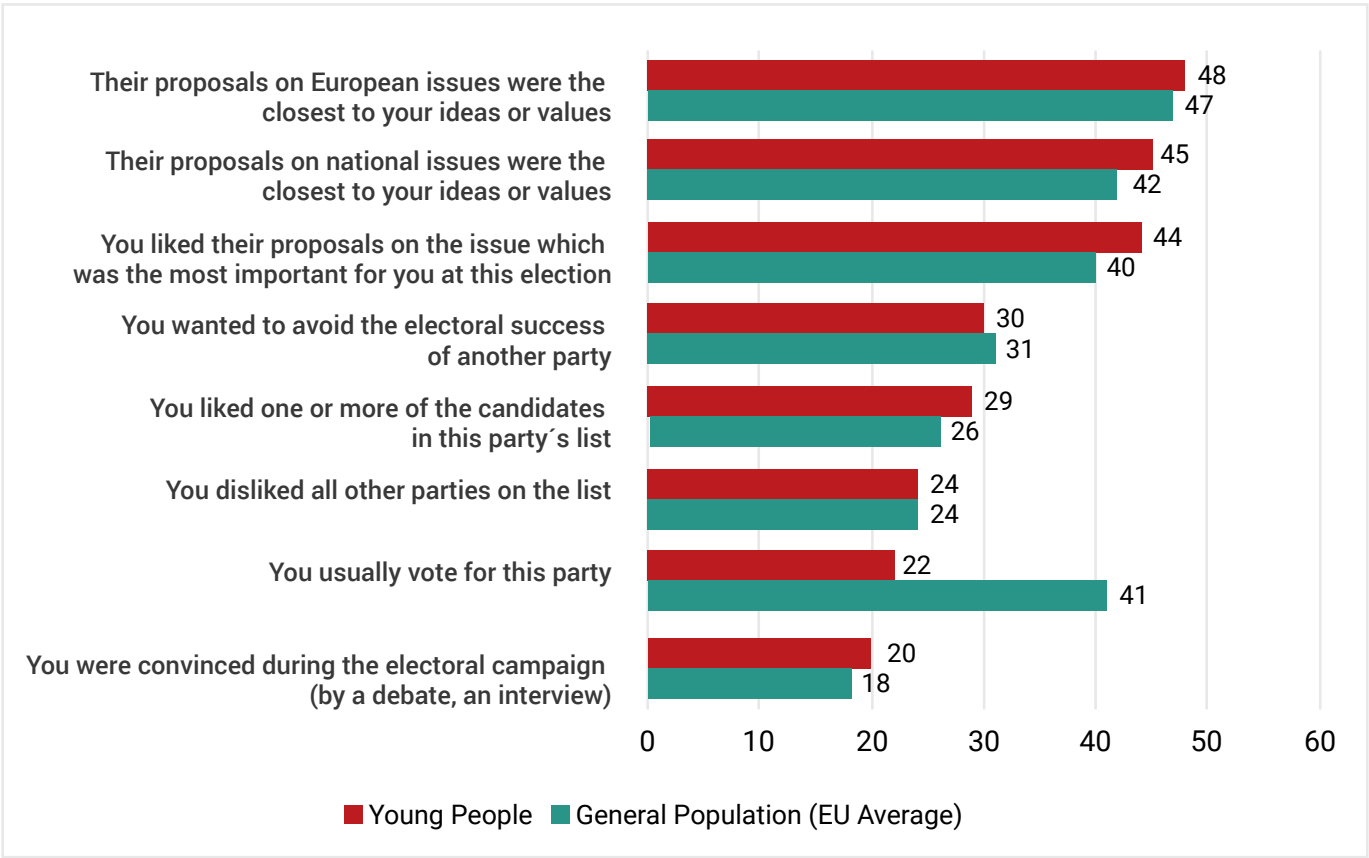
Finally, positive efficacy, or, to put it differently, the feeling that the vote can make a change on the EU level, was more prominent among the young as a reason to turn out to vote and selected at a rate of 24% versus 18% of the overall population. This finding suggests that young people, who voted, do not disproportionately discard the importance their vote, but rather have a higher confidence that it actually matters if they vote.

3.4.2 Motivations to vote for certain parties

Across the whole EU, the key factors influencing young voters’ choice of party (Figure 22) were alignment with their ideas or values on European issues (48%) and national issues (45%), as well as favouring proposals on the most important issues to them (44%).<sup>50</sup> This suggests young people are open to persuasion and are influenced more by values and issues than partisan loyalty.

Looking at our case countries, some small differences appear. German and Swedish young people mainly resonated with the statement that they voted for that particular party because, firstly, their proposals on European issues were the closest to their ideas or values (30% GER, 31% SWE), and secondly, they liked the party proposals on the

Figure 22. Reasons given by young people for voting for a party by country (in %).



Source: Eurobarometer Post-Electoral Survey 2024

issue that was the most important to them at this election (19% GER, 21% SWE). Similarly in Poland, the number one reason to vote for certain parties was that they liked their proposals (28%).

In Hungary, in contrast, the main reasons for young people to vote for a specific party were that they have been convinced to vote for that party during the electoral campaign (24%). There is good reason to believe that at least part of the respondents who chose this option did so due to the enthusiasm that Peter Magyar managed to instil among the opposition, as evidenced by the large rallies and successful social media campaign, showcasing that his approach did have an impact. The claim that Magyar and his approach had a chance to seriously contest the dominance of Fidesz was convincing to young voters, including the policy proposals that were put forward (21%).

### 3.4.3 Motivations for young people to abstain

The main reason young people chose not to vote, cited by 28%, was a general lack of interest in politics. This lack of interest was more pronounced among young people than in the general population, where 20% expressed the same reason – making it the second most important factor for non-voting overall.

In contrast, a lack of trust in politics was a more significant issue for the general population (21%) than for voters under 25, where only 14% mentioned it as a reason for not voting. The Eurobarometer data shows that distrust in politics was primarily driven by respondents over 40 and was less of a factor for younger generations.

Similarly, the older the respondents, the more likely they were to be influenced by negative efficacy – the belief that their vote would not make a difference. This sentiment was expressed by 17% of the general population, compared to only 10% of those aged under 25.

Those broad trends were reflected in the data across our case-study countries, Hungary, Germany, Poland and Sweden. In all countries, the primary reasons for young people abstaining were general disinterest in politics and a lack of engagement with EU affairs (e.g., disinterest in politics: 51% in Hungary; 34% in Germany; and 29% in Poland). Practical barriers, such as being too busy, being on holiday or prioritising leisure activities, also contributed to low turnout for young people, reflecting a prioritisation of personal time over political engagement, but at significantly lower rates. Additionally, sentiments of disempowerment were evident – for instance, 14% of young Germans felt their vote had no consequences – while in Sweden, despite a small sample size, there was notable disinterest in EU affairs and higher opposition to the EU among young people.

## 3.5 Topics

In Chapter 2, we identified young Europeans' primary concerns as economic inequality, retirement systems, healthcare and climate change. The EPES, conducted three months later, largely confirms these priorities, while offering additional country-specific insights and, crucially, elaboration of the differences between voters and non-voters.

The survey closely mirrors our earlier findings on young people's interests and motivations. When asked which topic encouraged them to vote in the elections, a certain divide between *old* member states and *new* (i.e., all those who joined after 2004) emerges: young people in the *old* member states are more concerned with environmental issues, while young people in the *new* member states have economic and security concerns. For instance, concerns about international security are much higher in countries bordering Ukraine, like Poland (33%) and Hungary (32%). Similarly, economic motivations, such as unemployment, are more pronounced among young people in Poland (12%) and Hungary (25%), but virtually non-existent among young people in Sweden and Germany. In turn, environmental issues are less prominent among Polish (15%) and Hungarian (28%) young voters compared to their German (38%) and Swedish (78%) counterparts. The other economic variables

– social protection and healthcare – enjoyed the reverse support, with them being more significant motivators in Sweden (37%) and Germany (21%) than in Hungary (16%) and Poland (14%).

The *old-new* divide among member states is less clear in other areas. Migration is a significant concern in Germany (34%) and Hungary (30%) but receives limited focus among young people in Poland (17%) and Sweden (13%). Democracy and the rule of law are key issues in all four countries to a significant degree (between 39% in GER and 58% in SWE). Topics that had high support in only one country are gender equality (20%) and crime (20%) in Sweden.

These findings suggest that the collective narrative about what young Europeans want is nuanced. Chapter 2 highlights a generally neutral or slightly positive perception of the EU among young voters across Europe, with notable generational divides. The Eurobarometer data instead also suggests a certain topical divide between countries, loosely along the lines of *old* and *new* member states.

### 3.5.1 Differences between voters and non-voters

Besides the motivation to vote, it is imperative to look at why 64% of European young people did not vote. Stuningly, the same number (64%) of young EU citizens expressed their intention to vote in the upcoming European elections in a cross-EU representative Eurobarometer survey in April 2024, two months before the election.<sup>51</sup> By understanding the differences between voters and non-voters, valuable insights can be gained on how campaigns and political strategies may need to adapt to encourage greater young people's participation in elections. Bridging this "mobilisation gap" in European elections is crucial for fostering more inclusive engagement.

According to the data, non-voters significantly deprioritise democracy and the rule of law, with only 19% seeing these as relevant compared to 30% of voters. This suggests a broader disconnect from

key democratic principles – a theme also reflected in the demand analysis, where non-voters exhibit a detachment from institutional governance.

The demand analysis stipulated that non-voters focused on immediate, tangible socio-economic issues, prioritising personal welfare over broader political themes. The EPES supports this finding, with 21% of non-voters citing unemployment as a significant concern, compared to just 12% of voters, underscoring economic insecurity as a central factor for non-voters. Similarly, non-voters show greater concern for crime, wherein non-voters engage more with local safety issues than global concerns. This trend is consistent across the case studies, as demonstrated below.

For instance, non-voters in Hungary prioritise social protection, welfare and healthcare (65%); rising prices and the cost of living (50%); and the economic situation (43%) – all of these issues are also taken to heart by young Hungarian voters, suggesting there are no strong topical deviations among voters and non-voters in Hungary. Migration policies hold significant weight for German non-voters (38%), along with local economic issues like rising prices and the cost of living (24%). Global issues like climate change, prioritised by only 11% of non-voters, are of significantly lower concern for non-voters.

With 42% of non-voters in Poland expressing concern over rising living costs, their focus on economic stability resonates with the demand analysis findings of non-voter engagement with pressing economic challenges. Democracy and the rule of law attract only a modest 28% of non-voters, highlighting a reduced engagement with institutional topics compared to voters. Swedish non-voters are primarily concerned with migration (67%), crime and more immediate economic matters, showing a much lower engagement with climate change compared to voters.

### 3.6 Discussion

The results from the EPES show several trends in the participation of young people in EP elections. The overall decline in young voter turnout, from 42% in 2019 to 36% in 2024, highlights the challenge of maintaining engagement among young people. The question remains whether certain conditions existed in 2019 to mark a highpoint of young people's participation that is unlikely to be achieved again soon.<sup>52</sup> The 2019 elections are generally considered to have been cast in light of the repercussions of Brexit, with accompanying mobilising issues, such as immigration and climate, albeit with regionally differing degrees.<sup>53</sup> The Brexit experience gave fertile ground to mobilising narratives both pro- and anti-European to make their case about the merits or demerits of EU membership. The salience of the climate issue in 2019 propelled what some labelled the "green wave"<sup>54</sup> of record numbers for parties advocating environmental issues. The data showed that these developments sparked an increase in turnout, mainly driven by the younger half of the population (aged 15-24: +14pp; aged 25-39: +12pp). Chapter 2 showed that the environment was one of the most important issues to young people, and the 2019 election met this demand, which led to increased mobilisation. The accompanying public campaigns led by young people about the same issues helped such a narrative to have an impact.<sup>55</sup>

The 2024 elections, in contrast, were held under different circumstances. Europe has experienced a series of profound crises, from the global pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, that hit the European population on top of existing salient issues such as immigration. The different topical priorities among our case-study countries suggest, as other research also finds,<sup>56</sup> that European young people experienced the impact of those crises to different degrees across the continent. While the climate issue remained more salient in the *old* member states (Sweden and Germany), the *new* member states (Poland and Hungary) are much more concerned about economic issues, including the economic impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. Other research, such as the survey by ECFR,<sup>57</sup> lends

support that our findings are in fact representative in their respective regions. The ECFR survey also finds different primary concerns among the electorate and young people with the environment dominating in the north, security in the east, immigration in central Europe, and economic concerns in the south and east.

What thus can be said and seems to be evidenced in the data is that this year lacked an issue that directly corresponded to the primary concerns of young people. This could explain the drop in turnout after an election that had an issue such as the environment at its heart that mobilised young voters particularly. The differing results with left-wing shifts in Northern Europe (Sweden, Finland, Denmark) but right-wing shifts in Central Europe (Germany, Austria, France) and centre-party wins in *new* member states (Poland, Hungary, Baltics) provide evidence of how differing narratives and the salience of issues played out in each country.

Additionally, there are interesting observations that are informative as to what is needed to mobilise and address young voters successfully. Firstly, the fact that young people decide to cast a vote and who to cast a vote for relatively late suggests that efforts to persuade young people can be effective right up until the final moments before election day. If campaign laws allow, it seems worth continuing outreach and engagement until the very last possible moment before the election.

Secondly, the motivations for voting indicate a strong civic duty among young people, with 38% voting because they perceive it as their citizen duty. This suggests that there is a strong core of young people who understand the importance of voting to our democracies. The fact that 64% of young people surveyed in April 2024 – two months before the European Elections – expressed an interest in voting can be viewed similarly. This high figure is likely influenced, at least in part, by social desirability biases commonly found in such surveys, as voting is often perceived as a socially desirable behaviour, leading respondents to indicate they intend to vote even if they ultimately do not. Harnessing this social desirability in campaigns and appealing to

values such as democracy and the importance of voting – beyond individual self-interest – could be a promising strategy for increasing young voter turnout. The strong motivation of Polish voters to protect democracy and the rule of law can be viewed in this context, aligning with the broader sentiment observed during the 2023 national election campaign, which prominently championed these themes.

Thirdly, the biggest obstacle to young people voting is their disinterest in politics, as indicated by 28% of non-voters. Instilling interest in politics is hardly an achievable goal in the short term, even if campaigns are run successfully. Those attitudes are usually relatively strong, often formed at an early age, especially if politics is not a priority among their social circles. One strong argument for lowering the voting age is that it gives young people a chance to form an early habit of participating in elections, potentially fostering interest in politics. Instilling interest at a later stage becomes all the harder, as participation behaviour becomes more entrenched. Someone who never voted in their 20s is much less likely to start voting in their 30s.

Fourthly, addressing economic issues like unemployment and the cost of living, particularly in the *new member states*, appears to be an underutilised opportunity. The economic challenges are there to stay and a campaign and narrative that put the future of young people and their economic and personal prospects at centre stage is a longer-lasting narrative with impact potential. The economic challenges are persistent, and a campaign focused on highlighting the future prospects of young people – both economically and personally – could serve as a powerful and enduring narrative.

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## **4. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**

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## 4. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

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Launched prior to the European elections, this study explores young voters' engagement, driven by two key observations: the growing reliance of young people on social media for political information and the apparent success of far-right parties in leveraging these platforms to attract them. In response, we analysed how various political parties – not just those on the far right – were engaging with young voters. Are they actively targeting young people on social media within the framework of their campaigns? What strategies and frequencies are being employed? Which issues are prioritised, and how effective are these efforts in resonating with young audiences? To analyse this and assess social media's relation to young people's political preferences, we situated our analysis between two chapters: one reviewing a pre-election survey, where young respondents identified important issues; and another examining the actual votes of young people and post-electoral sentiments. We asked the following questions. Who did young people vote for? What influenced their decisions to vote or abstain? What motivated them to choose certain parties over others?

The findings presented here offer valuable food for thought for political parties and institutions aiming to engage young people via social media, foremost in light of European Election campaigns, but a great many of them can also be understood as relevant for national campaigns, or communicating with young people on social media between elections. Before presenting the main findings and concluding

with implications for social democrats, it is essential to reiterate the note of caution introduced in the opening chapter. The data in our analyses come from a range of sources, as described in the methodology sections, and this diversity constrains our ability to draw definitive causal relationships between pre-election surveys, social media campaign analyses and post-election outcomes. In other words, the insights that follow are intended as thought-provoking contributions rather than absolute conclusions. We encourage researchers to view these results as an inspiration for further study, utilising methodologies that can deepen our understanding and better clarify correlations and causality in this area. For political decisionmakers and practitioners, they nonetheless constitute a good starting point to improve their outreach to young voters.

### 4.1 Main findings

#### 4.1.1 The 2019 honeymoon is over: The turnout of young people in the 2024 European elections

One of the main insights from the 2024 European election results is that turnout among young people remains very low (36%); it has substantially (6%) decreased compared to 2019 and is much lower than the population average (51%), which remained stable compared to 2019. Despite differences among our case-study countries, they all contributed significantly to at least one of the observed trends. For example, in Sweden, turnout of young voters dropped by almost a third. In Germany, the disparity between the turnout of young people (47%) and



overall turnout (65%) was striking. Additionally, overall turnout of young voters was low in Poland (25%) and slightly below average in Hungary (34%).

The reasons behind this trend are undoubtedly complex, but a few key factors stand out. The 2019 European elections were often referred to as a “climate election”, occurring at the height of the climate movement, which was fuelled by massive street protests led by young people. Additionally, the fallout from Brexit played a significant role, creating a fertile environment for mobilising both pro- and anti-European narratives. In contrast, the 2024 elections lacked a similarly polarising or galvanising issue that could have driven greater young voter turnout. The reasons for not voting are varied, but one stands out above the rest. Among young non-voters, the main reason for staying away from the polls was a lack of interest in politics (28%). Yet only 14% among the youngest age group cited distrust in politics, and 10% felt their vote would not change anything. These data points suggest that a lack of interest in politics, rather than cynicism connected to the political system or a lack of trust, is a more significant barrier to young people’s participation, indicating a need to make politics more relevant and engaging to them. While a lack of interest is a critical factor, the data does not support the myth that young people are apathetic; over 70% of non-voters indicated other reasons for abstaining.<sup>58 59</sup>

Other factors also seem to have contributed. More than six in ten (64%) of young EU citizens expressed their intention to vote in the upcoming European elections in a cross-EU representative Eurobarometer survey in April 2024.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, a few weeks later at the ballot boxes, only 36% turned out to vote. While the 64% figure may partly reflect social desirability bias – where respondents are inclined to affirm socially approved behaviours like voting – it is equally plausible that a significant mobilisation gap contributes to the discrepancy. This serves as a clear call for self-reflection among political parties, European institutions and civil society organisations working to inspire young people to participate in elections.

With social media having become the primary source of political content for young people in recent years, it also begs the question of whether and, if so, what went wrong with social media strategies that were supposed to motivate young people to vote. For the focus of this study, this means that, while the reasons for not voting are complex, it seems reasonable to assume that democratic political parties and their candidates, as the main actors vying for votes during the election campaign, have been at least in part unable to appeal to many young people and motivate them to vote, in general, and for themselves.

#### 4.1.2 Choosing your colour, picking your party

In Chapter 3, our analysis highlights the diverse patterns of young people’s voting behaviour in the 2024 EP elections across Hungary, Germany, Poland and Sweden.

In Hungary, the incumbent Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orban, experienced a significant vote share decrease among the overall population, compared to the 2019 EP elections, to 45%. The emergence of the Tisza party, headed by Fidesz rebel Peter Magyar, marked a notable shift. Tisza secured 30% of the overall vote – the best result for a single opposition party in years – with strong support from young urban voters, with 54% of young voters backing Magyar. Fidesz came second among young people, at 28%, much less than in older age groups. The social democratic coalition DK/MSZP-P is estimated to have around 7% support among 18-29 year olds, which is roughly in line with their overall support from the population. However, we had less confidence in the polling data for this party.

In Germany, the CDU/CSU won decisively with 30% of the vote, while the AfD placed second for the first time at 16%. Among young voters, the CDU/CSU led narrowly, with 14%, together with the Greens, at 14% as well. The AfD followed closely behind, with 13% among young voters. The SPD was less popular among the young (11 %) than the overall electorate (14%). This trend is reversed for the other centre-left

outlet, the greens, who were more popular among young people (14%) than the overall electorate (11%). Notably, 28% of young voters supported smaller parties not represented in the Bundestag, compared to 14% in the overall population. Among young people, Volt (8%) and Die Partei (4%) gained notable support, reflecting a shift toward progressive and fringe alternatives – a trend more likely in EU elections, where the 5% threshold does not apply as it does at national and regional levels.

In Poland, the liberal-conservative KO led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk won with 37%, narrowly defeating the national-conservative PiS at 36%. Among young voters, KO led substantially with 47%. The far-right Konfederacja, popular among young men, also had immense traction among the young (30% versus 12% of overall electorate). PiS was widely unpopular among young people, securing only 5%, a huge contrast to their overall result according to EPES. Other data, such as that from EES, suggest this number is underestimated and PiS scored much higher at the expense of Konfederacja. Social democratic Lewica performed better among young voters (10%) than overall (6%), indicating greater appeal among the young, but still a small share among all young voters.

In Sweden, a shift to the left was evident. The SD maintained first place with 25%, and the Greens gained 14%. Among young voters, left-of-centre parties dominated: 29% supported the Social Democrats and another 29% the Greens, both higher than their overall shares. The Left Party also saw increased support from young people (16% versus 11% overall). Right-of-centre parties lagged among young people, the EPES suggested little support among those aged 18-24 for the far-right SD, albeit the true number likely hovers around 10% according to secondary data. Overall though, support for the far right among young people is comparatively lower than in the other case-study countries.

These country-based views lead to a couple of cross-country observations.

- Far-right support among young people: in three of the four case-study countries – Hungary, Germany and Poland – the far right enjoys significant support among young voters, often surpassing that of social democrats. Yet there are clear differences between parties that are, or until recently were, in government (Fidesz, PiS) and those that are not. The former score worse among young people than among the overall population, likely because they cannot present themselves as anti-system or as a refreshing alternative. In contrast, parties that can portray themselves this way – and that place particular emphasis on engaging young people through social media (Konfederacja, AfD) – enjoy relatively greater support among young voters.
- Sweden is somewhat different: Sweden stands out with high support from young people for left-wing parties, including the Social Democrats and Greens, and less support for the far right. This contrasts sharply with the other countries studied.
- Challenges for social democrats: social democratic parties face challenges in attracting young voters, particularly in Hungary and Poland, where centre-right parties (Tisza and KO) are the primary opposition among young people.
- Young people shift toward alternatives: in Germany, there's a notable tendency among young voters toward smaller progressive and fringe parties not represented in the Bundestag, indicating a desire for alternatives outside the traditional political spectrum.

This elucidates which parties young people voted for, but what made them decide on one party over another, and how are their social media campaigns targeting young people?

### 4.1.3 Policy matters to the young! Democratic parties had a mixed record of conveying them on social media

Post-electoral survey data shows that policy proposals are decisive for young voters in European elections, dominating their reasons for party choice. Young voters prioritise issues aligned with their values and the strength of proposals addressing their primary concerns. Factors like party loyalty and candidate affinity matter much less. Interestingly, while three of our case studies consistently confirmed this trend, Hungary was the exception. There, the leading reason for young people to turn out to vote – cited by 24% of young voters – was that they were convinced during the electoral campaign. This is likely due to the emerging Tisza party's immense momentum from large rallies and successful social media posts.

If topical policy proposals mattered, which ones were young people most concerned about? As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, overall, young Europeans have been particularly focused on economic inequality, the retirement system, healthcare and climate change. The findings also reveal variations between countries, highlighting a divide between *old* (pre-2004) and *new* (post-2004) EU member states. Young people in *old* member states like Germany and Sweden also prioritise environmental issues, while those in *new* member states like Poland and Hungary also focus on security concerns, particularly due to their proximity to Ukraine. Economic issues like unemployment are significant in Poland (12%) and Hungary (25%) but negligible in Sweden and Germany. The *old-new* divide is less clear on issues like migration and democracy. These findings suggest that young Europeans' priorities are nuanced and vary by country, challenging a singular narrative.

Our social media analysis in Chapter 2 indicates that, while most parties addressed these topics in some form, their messaging had shortcomings. On Facebook and Instagram, parties often mentioned young people in general terms or simply called for their participation. So far, so unsurprising. Beyond this, posts targeted at young people varied across

countries without an overarching pattern, covering the economy, climate change, EU fund allocation and women's rights. Political parties generally adhered to their core messaging in their campaigns targeting young people: social democrats emphasised equality and social justice (notably in Poland and Germany); greens concentrated on climate issues (especially in Germany); and far-right parties like Fidesz in Hungary highlighted family-oriented policies, a theme echoed by Poland's centre-right KO. In Germany, both the Greens and CDU addressed traditional young people's topics such as mobility, with a focus on Interrail. However, the far right distinguished itself through negative campaigning, targeting opponents and institutions like the EU (Konfederacja in Poland) or "mainstream media" (AfD in Germany). Hungary's centre-right Tisza party also gained traction with critical posts aimed at Fidesz. A significant shortfall across the campaigns was the tendency to treat young people as a uniform group, with few parties offering targeted messaging for distinct subgroups. An analysis of TikTok campaign videos in Germany, conducted as a spin-off of this research project, suggests that the AfD – as an example of a far-right party in one of our case-study countries – was much more effective at addressing young people with relatable messages, providing concrete takeaways for young people, notwithstanding the despicable content of those messages.<sup>61</sup>

Another notable trend was the democratic parties' general failure to develop persuasive narratives that acknowledged young people's discontent and presented future-oriented solutions. Although social media campaigns are only one element shaping young voters' views, the lack of clear, coherent positions in a forward-looking framework may have opened the door for the far right's simpler, exclusionary messages to gain traction and engagement. This dynamic was likely amplified by structural advantages for the far right on social media, which is discussed further in the following sections.

Moreover, as shown in Chapter 1, there is also a darker side to why far-right messages may resonate with young people, as approval of far-right attitudes has become normalised across European societies,

including among the youngest. These views are increasingly mainstream, shared not only by far-right supporters but also by significant segments of conservative, liberal and social democratic voters. This normalisation of far-right sentiments may explain, in part, why messages from these groups are able to engage and influence a wider audience of young people than previously expected.

#### 4.1.4 More is not merrier: Engagement matters more than quantity of posts

Overall, the political parties we monitored in our social media analysis allocated a relatively small portion of their posts related to the European elections to content aimed at young people, with an average of around 10.6%. Our findings showed that social democrats had the highest proportion of posts focused on young people, with 14.8% of their total campaign content targeting young people. Similarly, other left-leaning parties, such as the greens, also dedicated a notable share (12.8%) of their posts to young people's issues.

However, in social media strategy, success is not determined by the volume of posts, but by the level of engagement they generate – through clicks, views, shares and comments. The quantity of posts does not necessarily translate into higher engagement. Despite posting less frequently about young people – both in absolute terms and relative to their overall European election content – far-right parties achieved the highest average and total interactions for their posts focused on young people. This suggests that their messaging resonated more strongly with their audience. In contrast, social democratic parties, despite publishing a larger volume of posts targeting young people, experienced relatively low levels of engagement.

In addition to the challenge for democratic parties to articulate policy proposals embedded in a forward-looking narrative and conveyed in an attractive way to elicit engagement, our data suggests that the negativity of content – which is rewarded by social media algorithms – may be an important explanatory factor for the heightened engagement

such content receives. Yet, as the relationship between negativity and higher engagement lacked statistical significance, we complemented this with the analysis of a broader dataset on European election campaigning (not only looking at young people) that specifically looked at “toxic language” – language that is rude, disrespectful or unreasonable and is likely to make someone leave the discussion.<sup>62</sup> These findings reveal that Instagram and Facebook posts containing toxic content generated more interactions. Taken together, these results suggest that the engagement success of far-right actors may be linked to their use of negative and toxic content, highlighting the significant role such strategies play in driving social media interactions.

Based on our analysis, we identified several factors that might explain why far-right parties are more successful in engaging young people. Their use of negative and specifically toxic language tends to generate high levels of likes, clicks and engagement on social media platforms driven by algorithms rewarding such language. These messages may also resonate partly because extremist positions have become alarmingly prevalent among the general population – including the youngest age group – even among supporters of democratic parties. Additionally, democratic parties often fail to fully address young people's desire for concrete proposals or broader, forward-looking narratives to tackle widespread discontent. This shortcoming allows the far right to exploit the situation with simplistic, nostalgic visions for addressing current challenges.

It's important to note that our research does not occur in a vacuum; others have shed light on general factors contributing to the far right's wider engagement, which likely also apply to their messaging directed at young people.<sup>63</sup> They heavily invest in digital communication, utilising advanced technology and early platform adoption to produce professional content. By offering digital media alternatives, they aim to replace mainstream journalism as the primary news source. They create counter-publics by networking politicians and activists who coordinate campaigns like influencers. Emphasising cultural unity, they foster a strong



collective identity and leverage emotions for group cohesion. Their messages are platform-optimised, using concise, provocative speeches that generate shareable online clips.

#### **4.1.5 It's never too late: Last-minute campaigns matter to convince the young**

Engagement is crucial, and our findings demonstrate that it's never too late to persuade young voters to turn out via social media. We have shown that the youngest age group is, by a significant margin, the one most likely to decide at the last minute whether to vote in European elections and which party to support. A high proportion of under 25 year olds make these decisions in the weeks or days before, or even on the day of, the election. While political parties and candidates often use the "home stretch" of a campaign to sway the last undecided voters, this may be especially important for convincing young voters in European elections. To some extent, this is reflected in how parties targeted young voters on social media; we observed a general upward trend in posts on topics connected to the European elections related to young people as election day approached. However, this trend was somewhat erratic, suggesting there is potential to enhance efforts in targeting young voters before election day.

### **4.2 Implications for social democracy**

#### **4.2.1 An untapped voting potential among the young**

Social democrats cannot be characterised as the preferred alternative for young voters in three of our four case studies, with Sweden being the notable exception, as evidenced by the European election results. Yet, there is untapped potential among young voters for social democrats in European elections. Nearly two thirds of young people did not vote, and among these non-voters, those with little or no interest in politics or EU affairs formed the largest group. According to the literature on young voters, there are at least four reasons why political parties and other democratic institutions should consider this a critical issue that needs to be addressed.

Firstly, research suggests that individuals who vote in their first eligible election are more likely to continue voting throughout their lives.<sup>64</sup> Secondly, the "formational years" hypothesis posits that political values and voting preferences solidify during early adulthood and become entrenched over time.<sup>65</sup> While evidence for this hypothesis is not entirely conclusive, it suggests that it may be strategically beneficial for political parties to persuade young people now, as this effort could secure them as future voters. Once this opportunity is missed and they become older, convincing them may become much more difficult. Thirdly, generational differences – so-called cohort effects – may contribute to distinct voting patterns of young people. Voters from the Interwar and Boomer generations were socialised in an era when traditional political cleavages shaped a largely stable party system. Consequently, their voting decisions remain primarily influenced by these enduring structural factors.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, young people, socialised in an era of post-cleavage politics, are more likely to be influenced by short-term political factors and determinants.<sup>67 68</sup> Finally, young voters are not only more sensitive to electoral trends than older citizens, but they might set political trends that eventually carry over to the older population.<sup>69</sup>

The second challenge is to convince both non-voters and those considering alternatives to social democrats. Critics might argue that young people lack clear party affinity and are more inclined than older voters to up and coming, or new parties, making traditional parties less appealing.<sup>70</sup> While this concern has merit, there's also a positive perspective. In a fragmented voting landscape, the ability to potentially attract a broad audience is advantageous. Although the era of catch-all parties may not return soon, longitudinal data indicates that social democrats are among the most liked parties in Western Europe, with around 60% of young people expressing positive feelings toward them (Figure 23).<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, only about 30% reject them, similar to centre-right parties (Figure 24). While this data doesn't reflect voting intentions, it shows that social democrats have significant untapped potential. Approximately 60% of young people might, at a minimum, have an open ear to

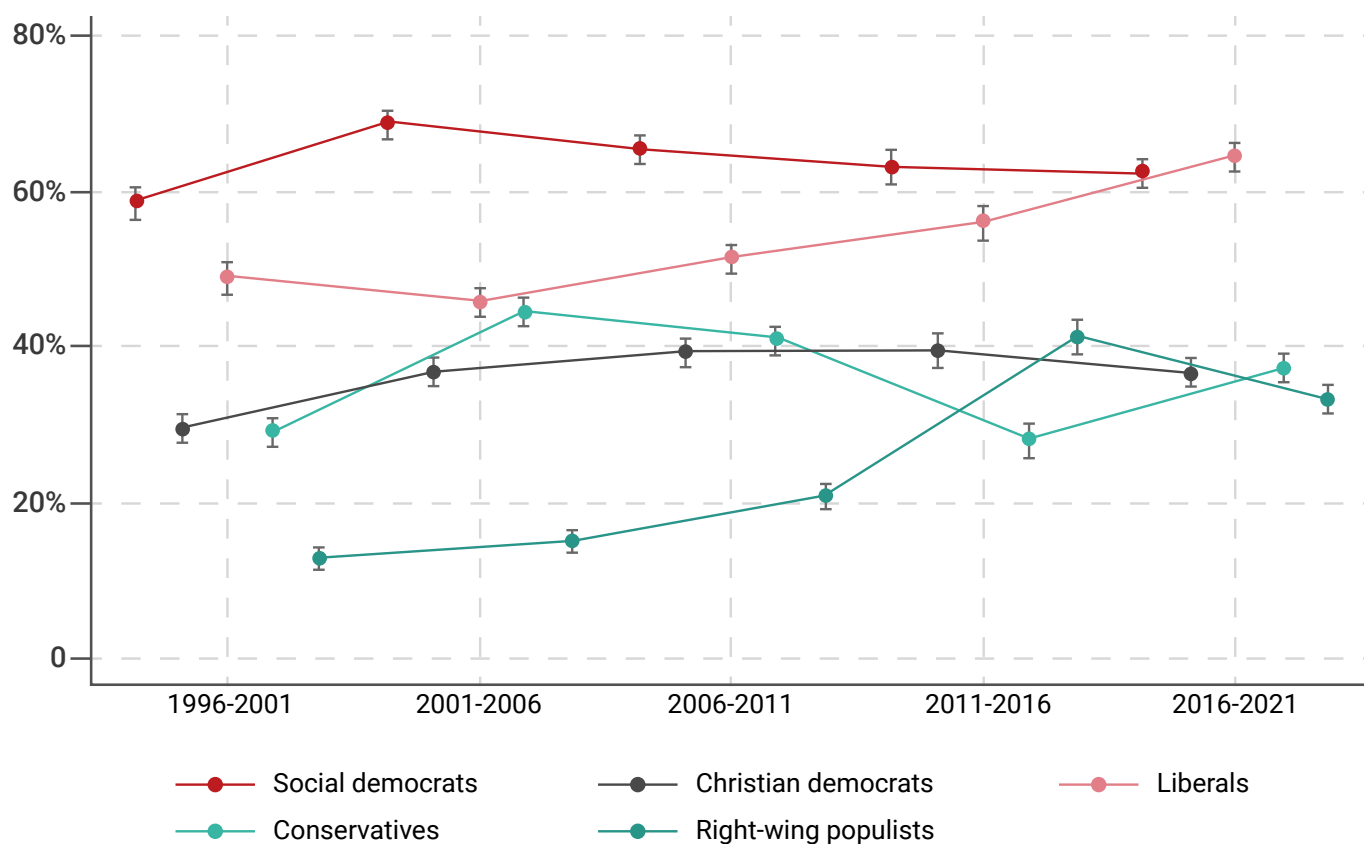
progressive proposals if presented with a convincing narrative and effective means of communication.

While this policy study focuses on engaging young voters through social media – their primary source of political content – we also recognise other important avenues suggested by recent large-scale literature reviews on young people’s political participation to mobilise young non-voters. These include increased involvement via young people’s wings of parties, inclusive policy making that gives young people a meaningful voice, civic education, addressing their priorities seriously, creating accessible participation opportunities and intergenerational projects promoting solidarity between generations.<sup>72</sup> This multifaceted effort is not solely the responsibility of political parties, but the literature indicates it offers clear benefits for them.

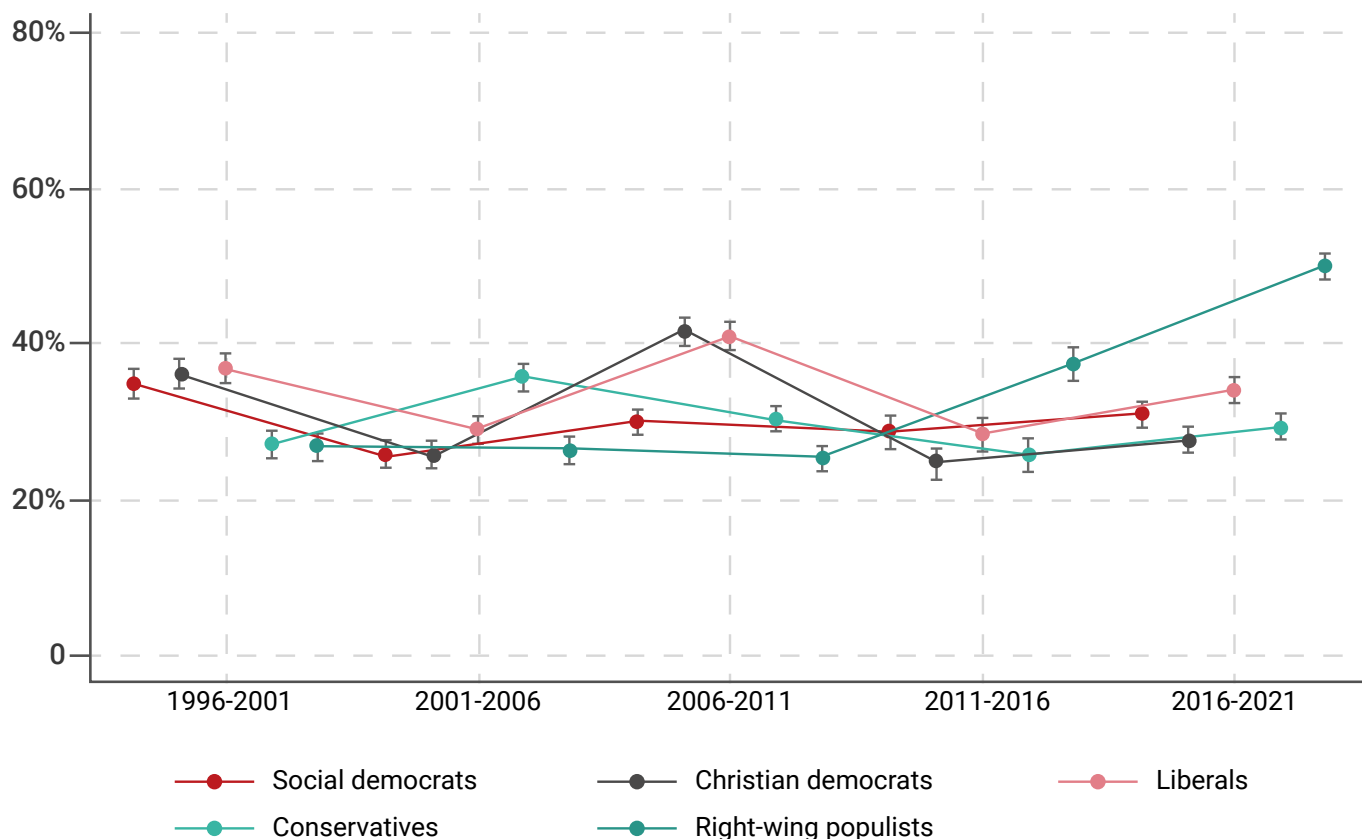
#### 4.2.2 A positive vision, in times of permanent crises

The evidence presented suggests that social democratic messages may resonate with young people as they decide whom to vote for. In Chapter 3, we demonstrated that policy proposals – along with their narratives and framing – are key factors for young voters when choosing a party. Before discussing how to communicate these messages on social media later, let’s examine the key elements that may persuade them. Notably, the data presented throughout the study has implications for social democratic parties’ communication to young people, both in national elections and more generally – not just for the distant 2029 European elections. While we fully acknowledge that European elections differ critically from national ones, we believe that some of the broader insights on narratives and topics remain valuable.

**Figure 23. Support for different party families across Western Europe (youngest: 24 years old).**



**Figure 24. Rejection of different party families in Western Europe (youngest: 24 years old).**



Chapters 1 and 3 noted significant discontent and far-right attitudes among young people but also a positive: EU favourability is at a decade high,<sup>73</sup> and higher among the young than older voters. This suggests that speaking positively about the EU when addressing young people will, at a minimum, not harm a social democratic message. It offers a chance to reclaim pride in being European, shifting it from the far right's nostalgic sense of the word to a progressive vision of Europe as a place to be proud of – built on a social model that leaves no one behind and fosters inclusive belonging. While this may not be news, it is worth re-emphasising in difficult global times like these. For young voters, factors like EU support and European identity, though not top priorities, were significant (20-25%) factors in making young people cast their ballot. For non-voters, reasons like disliking or being disinterested in EU elections were minor factors for staying away from the polls. This suggests a positive EU

campaign is unlikely to be counterproductive but should connect to issues that matter most to young people.

Economic priorities – such as the cost of living, welfare and health services – dominate young people's voting motivations prior to elections (Chapter 1) and could potentially encourage non-voters to participate (Chapter 3). These core social democratic issues are crucial when engaging young people. While addressing these priorities, it is essential to consider regional differences: climate change resonates more with young people in "old" member states, while security and the war in Ukraine are pressing concerns for countries bordering Ukraine. Additionally, specific national issues, such as gender equality and internal security in Sweden, should also be recognised.



However, addressing economic and social concerns isn't enough; democratic parties need to present a positive future outlook. Young people widely share concerns about current economic and political conditions and bleak future prospects. Social democratic parties must develop and communicate a constructive narrative for change, challenging the far right as advocates for altering the status quo. Combining a focus on economic and social policy with a hopeful vision centred on the younger generation is essential – moving beyond merely opposing the far right or defending the status quo. This is also where social democrats can tap into the emotions that are often needed to get people's attention, especially on social media. Rather than indulging in negativity, these emotions can be positive. Conversely, it would be a critical mistake for democratic parties to adopt far-right narratives, as this normalises those views. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, engaging with right-wing narratives typically promoted by conservative parties does not attract new votes for progressive parties, as voters tend to support the "original" party behind these messages.<sup>74</sup> Secondly, topics such as migration are generally of less concern to young people compared to their older counterparts. To circumvent the pressure of stirring up negativity for the sake of polarisation – which social media algorithms might reward – we can employ aspirational narratives about a better future. This approach may help alleviate the pressure for an external out-group to polarise against (e.g., focusing solely on the far right and potentially amplifying their message). Instead, we can use an imaginary out-group: our past selves we don't wish to become again (more chauvinistic, less prosperous) or our worst selves (fearful, discouraged, blaming others who are also struggling). By contrasting an aspirational, better future "we" with a worse-off past or less sympathetic current "we", social democrats can positively frame the narrative. Having discussed some notions that social democrats can use to connect with young people, this study concludes by outlining how these messages can be better communicated on social media.

#### 4.2.3 A revamped social media strategy

Some might argue that social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook aren't suited for detailed policy discussions, and that previous research advises keeping content light, fun and emotionally engaging when targeting young people. While this has merit, not talking about policy, or providing broader answers to sentiments of discontent, does not. Rather, it seems crucial to break down complex ideas into digestible, relatable content that connects with young voters' real experiences, satisfying their demands for substantive ideas, because, as we have shown, young people pick parties for their proposals.

In this regard, there are lessons to be learned from the far right's effective use of social media – even if we fundamentally oppose their exclusionary and anti-democratic rhetoric. As ancient Chinese military general, strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu wisely noted, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles". Progressive parties should confidently study the far right's strategies to enhance their own messaging, using these insights to promote democratic values and counter authoritarian narratives.

- Traditional political parties should move away from a sender-receiver model and adopt a participatory propaganda model.<sup>75</sup> This approach involves the audience as active participants in the creation and dissemination of compelling content, reflecting a shift towards a "one to many, to many more" communication dynamic, where individuals not only receive messages but also contribute to their dissemination, often amplifying the original message through their social networks.
- Politicians should craft social media posts that directly address young people, offering concrete takeaways in a dialogue-driven manner. To take an example from some of the posts we analysed, instead of abstractly discussing issues like the mental health crisis and vaguely stating that action is needed, they should weave messages into stories of those affected – highlighting specific institutions that offer help and outlining

concrete policies to address these issues. To engage on an equal footing, they should approach young people as equals, valuing their opinions and contributions. Encouraging two-way communication by inviting feedback, questions and (controversial) discussions is crucial. Providing background and context enhances understanding, and tailoring messages to reflect the diverse experiences within the young demographic ensures inclusivity.

- Despite the success of far-right parties, progressive politicians should avoid engaging in toxic or overly negative rhetoric, even if it may garner more engagement. This contradicts the principles of a liberal democracy, which values a plurality of opinions. While it doesn't exclude calling out extremist forces attacking democracy, as argued above, or sharply politicising non-identity-related topics, such as wealth inequality, that's far from enough. Instead, they should focus on regulating social media platforms that economically benefit from promoting such content. By pushing these platforms to adjust their algorithms to encourage healthier political debates, we can reduce polarisation and foster constructive dialogue. Simple fact-checking and monitoring of hate speech are insufficient on their own. Addressing this issue is a long-term challenge that requires sustained effort to reshape the digital landscape for better political engagement. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, while this was not the focus of our debate, current tools such as the DSA and the "transparency and targeting of political advertising" directive were introduced shortly before the 2024 European elections. Only time will tell if their effects are sufficient to address this challenge, or if updates or entirely new legislation might be needed. Given the worrying political developments in the USA, where many of these platforms are based, this should be a focal point of attention for EU institutions in the 2024-2029 mandate.

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This study examines the social media strategies of political parties targeting young voters ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on Facebook and Instagram activity in Germany, Sweden, Hungary, and Poland. With social media emerging as a primary source of political information for young people—and considering the far right’s effective use of these platforms—the research investigates strategies to democratically engage young voters. By contextualising this social media analysis with detailed survey research on what concerned young Europeans before the elections and analysing whether they voted and their reasons for doing so, the findings offer valuable insights for political parties—especially social democrats—and policymakers aiming to enhance young people’s participation in future elections.

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