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Surprising Election, Surprising Votes

Young People and the Early 2025 Federal Election

At a glance

This paper summarises the results from the Youth Study of the 2025 Federal Election. The study examined the attitudes, information habits and party preferences of young people in the context of the 2025 federal election, in which those under the age of eighteen were not permitted to vote, unlike in the 2024 European election. The findings reveal that young people are exposed to politics through a variety of channels: social media plays a pivotal role, yet traditional media also retains significant influence. However, striking differences exist within the younger generation: education, gender and place of residence shape political orientation and voting behaviour far more strongly than the undifferentiated public image of “youth” would suggest.

Anger Over the Early Election

The early federal election of 23 February 2025 was exceptional in many ways. For many young people, it had particularly unpleasant consequences: all those who turned 18 only between the newly scheduled election date (in Febru-

ary) and the originally planned election date (in September) unexpectedly found themselves excluded from voting. Our results show that those affected were far from indifferent towards the newly scheduled election – they were annoyed at being deprived of the opportunity to participate.

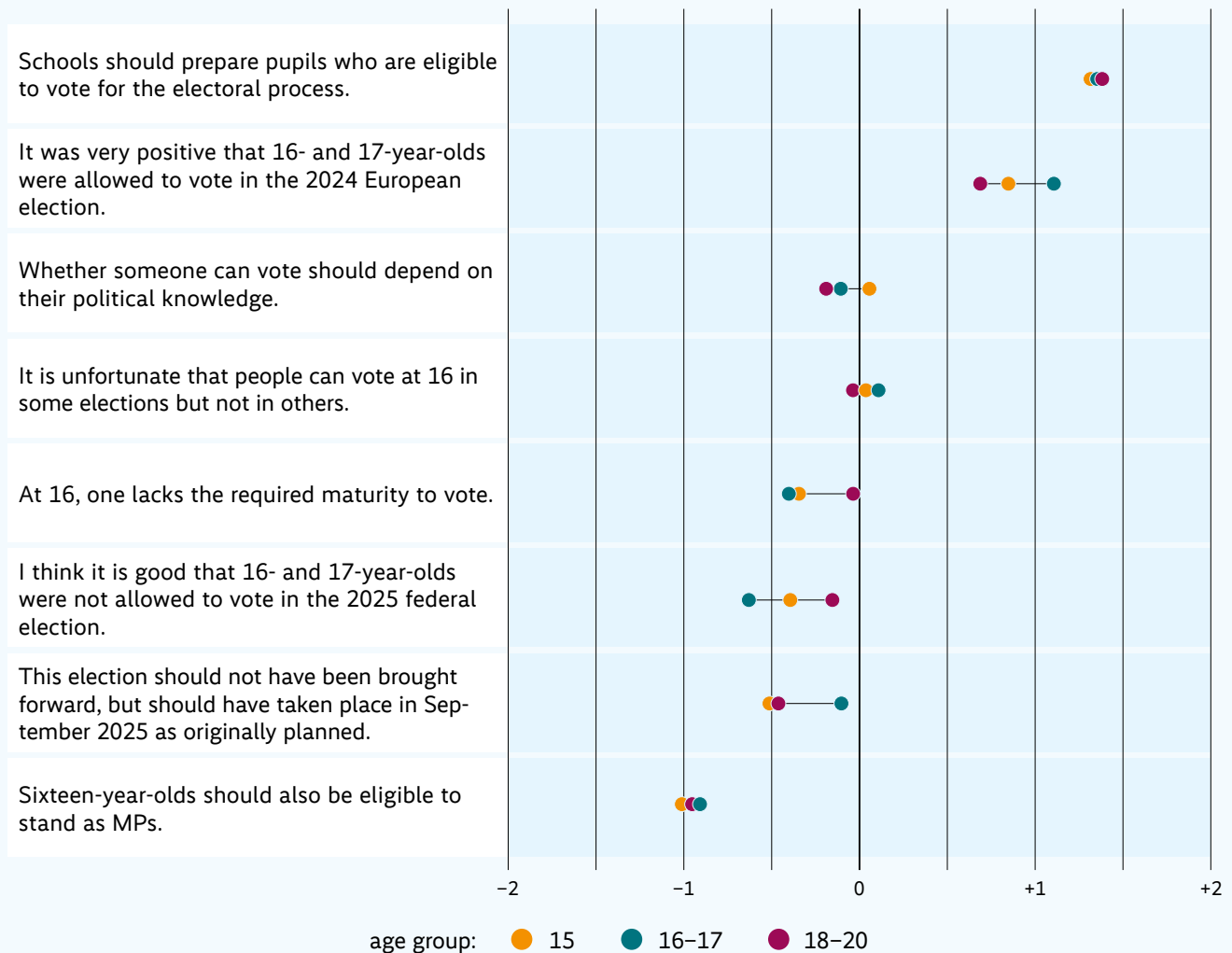
A Patchwork of Voting Ages

The combination of the 2024 European Parliament election and the 2025 federal election once again highlighted how unsatisfactory the current situation regarding voting age in Germany is. For the 2024 European election, a voting age of 16 was applied nationwide for the first time; for the 2025 federal election – just as for some state and local elections in certain federal states – the voting age remained 18. Not all young people – despite being directly affected – view this patchwork as a problem. Still, we see notable joy among young people who were eligible to vote in the 2025 federal election, significantly exceeding the levels of joy we observed during the 2024 European election. Conversely, frustration over not being eligible to vote in the 2025 federal election was significantly greater than in the 2024 European Election. The inconsistent voting age system means that young people are excluded from Germany’s most important election – even though they are allowed to participate in others. These early, po-

Fig. 1

Level of agreement with various statements regarding the voting age by age group.

(Mean values, scale from -2 to +2)



Source: Youth Election Studies for the 2025 Federal Election.

Question wording: "Below, you will find several statements about the voting age. Please state the extent to which you agree or disagree with each one. Responses should be given on a five-point scale ranging from „Strongly Disagree“ (-2) to „Strongly Agree“ (+2); the response option „Don't Know“ has been excluded."

tentially formative electoral experiences often lead to substantial frustration, which should be taken seriously, as they may negatively shape young people's broader perception of the political system and even their satisfaction with democracy.

Most Young People Support a Voting Age of 16

A homogenous voting age is desirable, even if it does not immediately imply what exactly the voting age should be. Our results show that young people themselves support a voting age of 16 for federal elections. This is especially true among those under 18. Among older people, scepticism toward lowering the voting age remains high. However, our findings indicate that such scepticism is largely unfounded – young people take their voting decisions no less seriously than older voters and are guided by similar motiva-

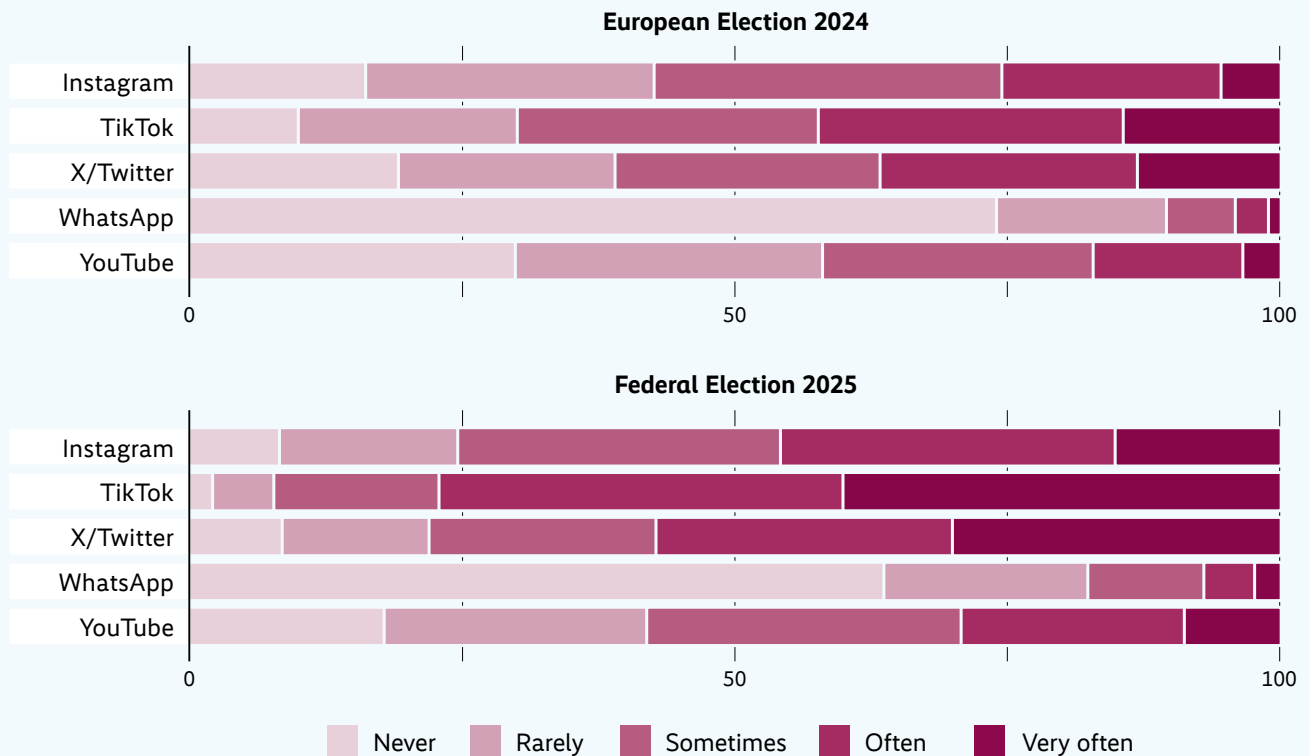
tions. The most common motivation among both young and old is that certain policies will be implemented in specific issue areas after the election.

Schools as a Key to Political Education and Getting Ready to Vote

A key argument in favor of lowering the voting age, frequently discussed in academic debates, is that it enables young people from diverse social backgrounds to be introduced to politics and elections at an earlier stage – specifically through schools. This is reflected in the attitudes of both younger and older respondents: the statement "Schools should specifically prepare students for voting" received broad support across age groups. Despite its importance, this point has received little attention in political debates about lowering the voting age.

Perceived Frequency of Political Content on Social Media During the 2024 European Election and the 2025 Federal Election (Comparison)

(Distribution across response categories, in percent)



Source: Youth Election Studies for the 2024 European Election and the 2025 Federal Election; only respondents who use the respective platform.

Question wording: "Thinking about the posts you saw on your social networks in the past week/in the week before the federal election: How often did these posts relate to politicians, political parties, or political issues concerning the federal election/European election?"

Traditional Media Channels Remain Important

When discussing young people's political attitudes and behaviour, information environments – especially social media – play a central role. Comparing our results from the 2024 European election and the 2025 federal election shows that digital media are (as expected) crucial for young people, although podcasts remain a niche source. However, claims about the decline of traditional media appear premature: all channels, including classic media such as television, were used much more intensively in the context of the 2025 federal election. Media usage patterns reflect not only long-term digital trends ("Online is becoming more important!") but also contextual circumstances surrounding major political events. Looking at the overall population, traditional television still reached the broadest audience in 2025.

TikTok Combines Reach with Political Content

Among young people, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok dominate. TikTok still lags slightly behind the others in reach but is rapidly catching up, especially among the youngest respondents. A huge generational gap separates under-20s from those over 20; TikTok remains a gen-

erationally segmented digital space. With regard to perceived political content, TikTok shows a remarkable combination: it pairs high reach (similar to WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram) with the political depth typically associated with X/Twitter, long considered Germany's "most political" platform. TikTok also shows special potential to reach and inform young people without (or not pursuing) Abitur (university entrance qualification).

The Left Party and the AfD Dominate Social Media

Regarding party-related content on social media during the 2025 federal election, we found particularly high visibility for the AfD and the Left Party, with the latter being portrayed in a particularly positive light. This is notable both on its own and compared to our results from the 2024 European election: in 2024, the AfD dominated social media with no close competitors. In 2025, AfD and The Left were nearly tied. Other parties still played only a minor role – despite significantly increasing their social media budgets and activities. These shifts in just one year demonstrate how fluid social media environments can be. The fact that parties other than the AfD and The Left failed to achieve similar visibility suggests that these two parties did something differently – and more effectively – than their competitors.

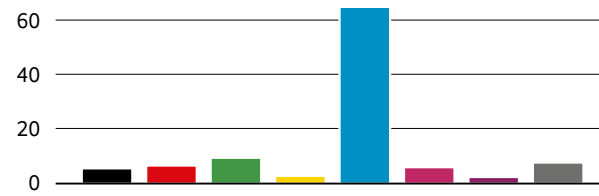
Perceptions of Party-Related Social Media Content During the 2024 European Election and the 2025 Federal Election (Comparison)

(Distribution across response categories, in percent)

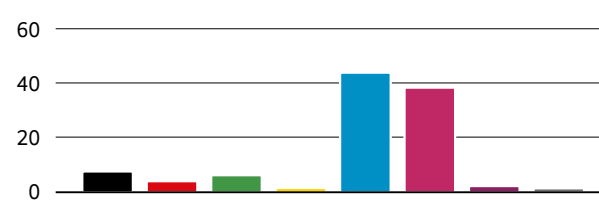
Are there parties that are represented particularly frequently?

If so, which ones?

European Election 2024



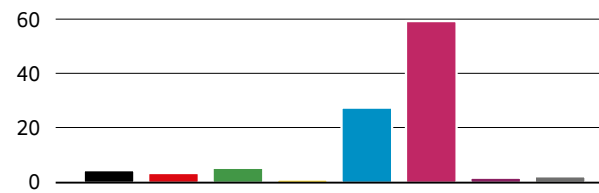
Federal Election 2025



Are there parties that are portrayed particularly positively?

If so, which ones?

Federal Election 2025



■ Yes ■ Don't know ■ No

■ CDU/CSU ■ SPD ■ Greens ■ FDP
■ AfD ■ The Left ■ BSW ■ Other

Source: Youth Election Studies for the 2024 European Election and the 2025 Federal Election; only respondents who use at least one social media platform.

Question wording: "Thinking about the posts you saw on your social networks in the past week/in the week before the European election/federal election: Did any particular parties appear especially frequently?"; [if yes:] "And which party appeared most frequently?" or "Thinking about the posts you saw on your social networks in the week before the federal election: Were any particular parties portrayed especially positively?"; [if yes:] "And which party was portrayed most positively?"

The Young Generation is Not Homogeneous

References to "young people" or a "young generation" often imply a misleading assumption of homogeneity. Our results on issue preferences and party preferences make this clear; it is empirically wrong to treat young people as a homogeneous political group. Instead, we see sharp differences based on gender, education, and place of residence. Comparing two contrasting groups – highly educated young women in major cities versus young men without higher formal education living outside major cities – reveals stark divides. The former group holds significantly

more left-leaning, progressive positions, while the latter leans more to the right. These differences are especially pronounced on cultural issues: equality, immigration and climate politics. The divide stems from all three characteristics – gender, education, and residential context – making it unlikely to be bridged in the short term.

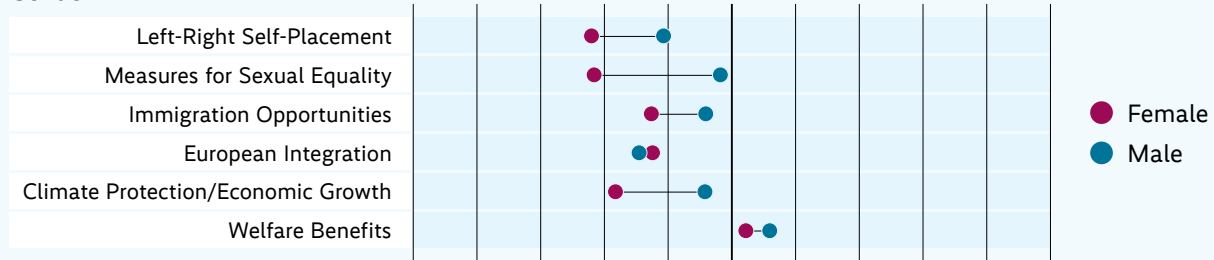
Diverse Party Preferences Among Young People

Our final look at young people's party preferences reveals great diversity and dynamism. Representative election statistics show that until 2017, either the SPD or the CDU/CSU

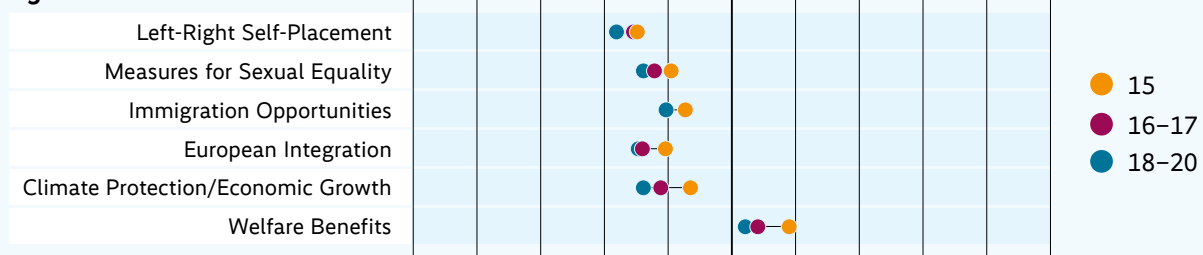
Issue Positions of Young People by Gender, Age, Residential Context, and Formal Education During the 2025 Federal Election

(Mean values, scale from -5 to +5)

Gender



Age



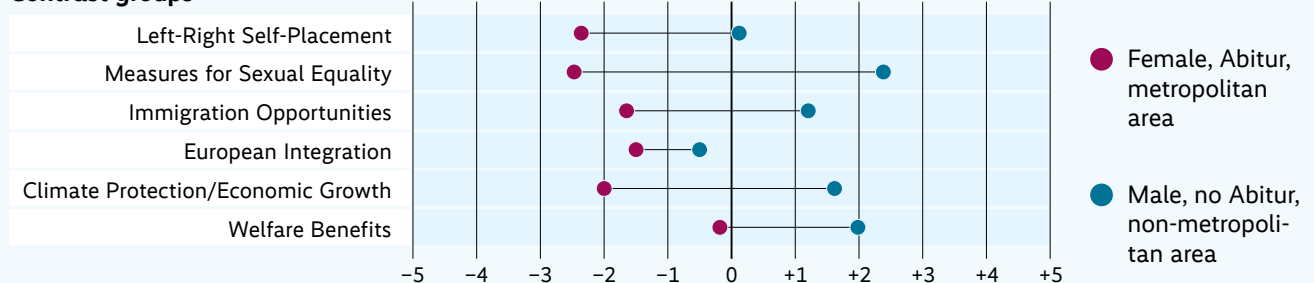
Residential context



Formal education



Contrast groups

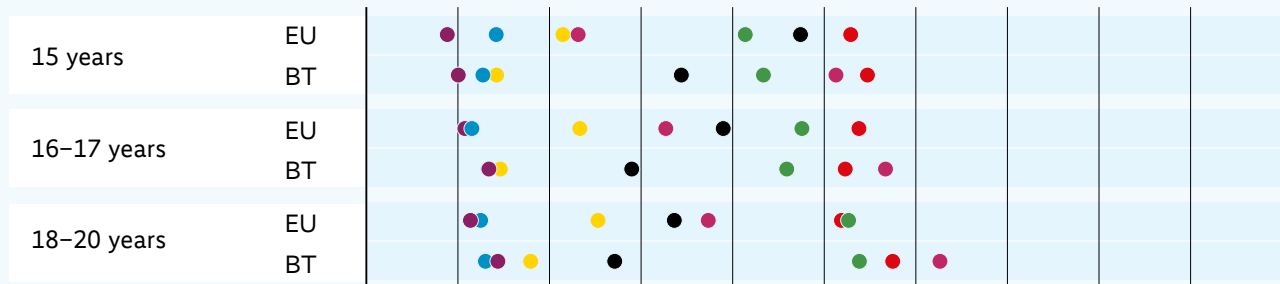


Source: Youth Election Study for the 2025 Federal Election. Question wordings: "In politics, people often talk about 'left' and 'right.' Where would you place yourself if 1 means 'left' and 11 means 'right'?" "Some believe that government measures to promote equality for people of different sexual orientations do not go far enough, while others think they already go much too far. What is your opinion on this question?" "Some people want to make it easier for foreigners to immigrate, while others want to restrict immigration. What is your opinion on this?" "Some want to advance European integration so that there is soon a common European government, while others think European integration already goes much too far. What is your opinion on this?" "Some believe that combating climate change should definitely take priority, even if it harms economic growth. Others believe that economic growth should definitely take priority, even if it hinders efforts to combat climate change. What is your opinion on this question?" "Some want lower taxes and social security contributions, even if this means fewer welfare benefits, while others want more welfare benefits, even if this means higher taxes and contributions. What is your opinion on this question?" Responses were collected on 11-point scales with labelled endpoints. For the above presentation, the welfare question was reversed so that "more welfare state" appears on the left.

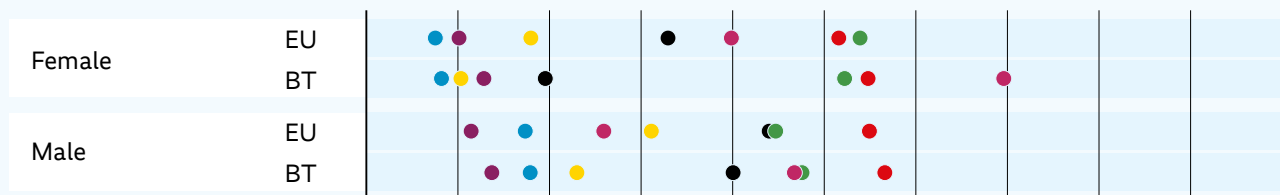
Electability of Parties in Social Subgroups During the 2024 European Election and the 2025 Federal Election (Comparison)

(Share, in percent)

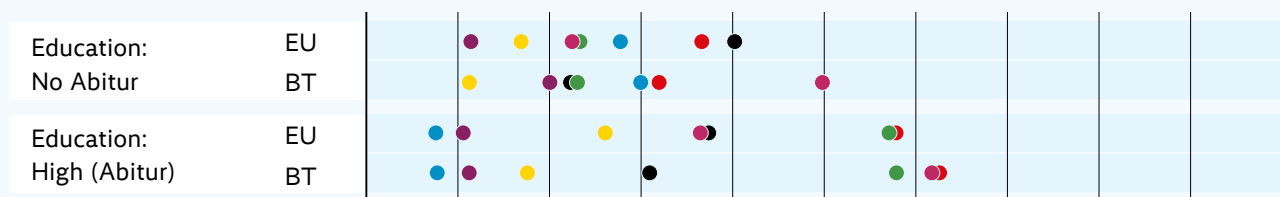
Age



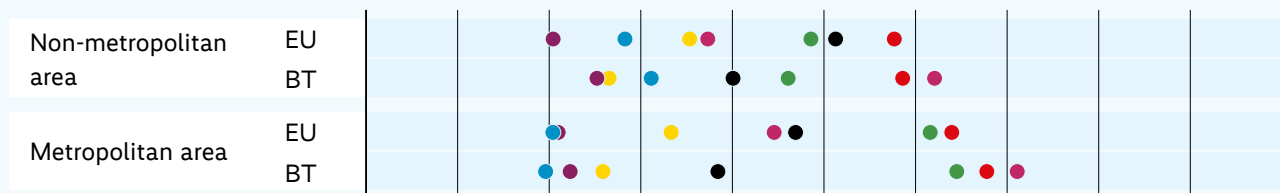
Gender



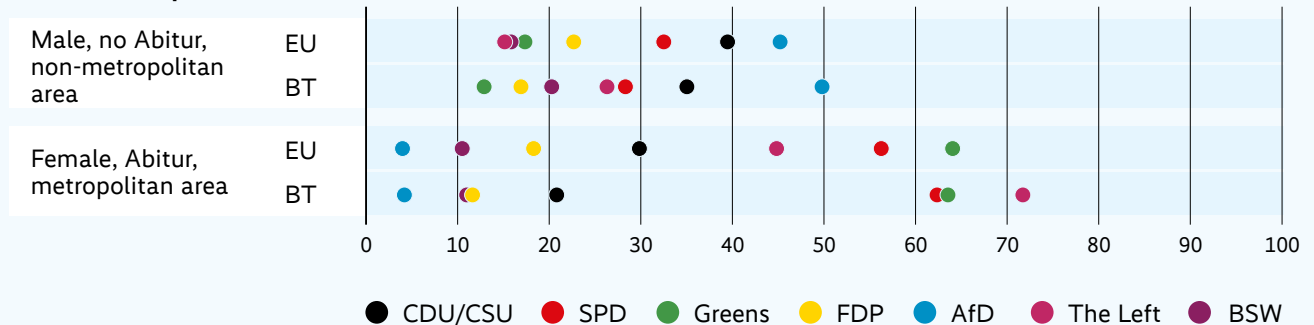
Formal Education



Residential Context



Contrast Groups



Source: Youth Election Studies for the 2024 European Election (EU) and the 2025 Bundestag Election (BT).

Question wording: "Which of the following parties could you generally imagine ever voting for? You may select multiple parties."

consistently placed first among 18- to 24-year-olds. This changed in 2021, when the Greens and FDP took the top two spots (with the FDP leading among young men and the Greens among young women). For the 2025 election, the statistics again show a different picture: The Left placed first, the AfD second. Gender differences persist: The Left is the clear frontrunner among young women, while among young men it is the AfD. These shifts illustrate increasing heterogeneity in young people's voting behaviour: their votes are spread more widely across more parties than those of other age groups. A unified "youth vote" simply does not exist.

Strong but Competing Potentials Left of Center

This is further confirmed by our analysis of "potential voters" – those who say they could see themselves voting for a given party at some point. This provides a deeper look at the underlying relations that young people have with different parties, and it also allows us to include those not yet eligible to vote. Comparing the 2024 European election with the 2025 federal election shows both stability and change: the SPD and the Greens retain consistently high potential, while we see strong dynamics for others – especially The Left. The share of young people who can imagine voting for The Left nearly doubled in this short period. Again, we see major group differences: among highly educated young women in major cities, The Left, the Greens, and the SPD dominate, creating substantial but overlapping – and therefore competing – potentials. Other parties matter far less in this group. Among young men without higher education outside major cities, no single party dominates. Nevertheless, the AfD performs best among this group, even increasing its lead over other parties from 2024 to 2025. Although The Left has also gained ground, it remains far from the peak values seen in other groups. The Greens have the lowest electability in this group in 2025.

Note on the Data Used of the "Youth Study for the 2025 Federal Election"

The study invited people aged 15 to 20 with German citizenship to participate. Sampling proceeded in two steps: first, municipalities of various sizes were selected; second, these municipalities provided addresses of respondents based on local population registers. Municipalities from six federal states were included: Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Baden-Württemberg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Rhineland-Palatinate. To enable comparisons with the broader electorate, we also included Berlin residents aged 21 to 79. In total, 4,801 people participated (at least partially), including 878 Berlin respondents aged 21 to 79. The survey provides a nuanced picture of young people's political attitudes and behaviour across selected municipalities in six German states, as well as a comparison with the rest of the electorate using Berlin as a focal point. It also allows for direct comparison between the 2025 federal election and the 2024 European election. However, neither sample is perfectly representative of all German youth, as the number of included states and municipalities is limited. Nonetheless, our objective is not to produce precise national estimates, but to identify and explain patterns and differences – making the samples particularly well suited for this purpose.

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