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EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE OBSERVATORY 2024

Lessons from Europe

In a year dominated by the political aftershocks of the cost-of-living crisis, many voters cast ballots rejecting incumbents and seeking change – including change offers from the far right. Governments were punished particularly harshly whenever they appeared distracted by abstract or ideological issues, which gave the impression of not sharing voters' priorities. The path forward requires us to focus on our positive offers, rather than tearing down our opponents; fight and win the practical economic solutions debate; neutralise concerns about immigration; and persuade swing voters, who are determining election outcomes, to cast their ballots for us.

The year 2024 was a super year for democracy – at least as measured by the number of elections. From India to the EU and the USA, billions of people had a chance to cast a ballot and have their say in their country's future.

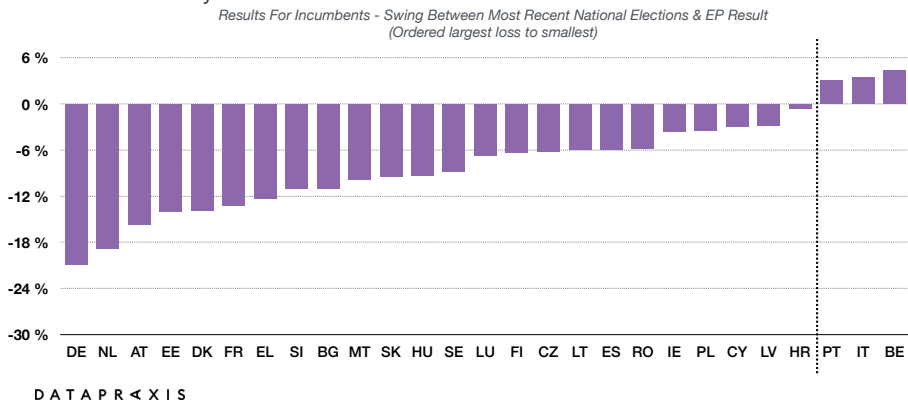
The rejection of incumbents was the standout trend across continents. From Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) losing its overwhelming majority for the first time in over a decade to Donald Trump winning back the White House and the British Conservative Party facing one of the worst defeats in its history, electorates demonstrated disappointment with the status quo and a longing for change.

In Europe, voters turned away from incumbents and towards the far right and authoritarian-leaning parties. We saw this across the continent, both in national elections and in the European Parliament elections. As we discuss below, successfully riding the anti-incumbency wave is a key part of the far right's story in 2024. At the same time, the growing strength of the far right did not begin with the post-Covid-19 anti-incumbency wave, and their success cannot be explained solely by dissatisfaction with incumbent mainstream governments.

Figure 1 shows the swing experienced by national incumbents across the 27 countries that had elections to the European Parliament in June. In all but three, incumbents could

not stem the desire for change. Many incumbents saw double-digit percentage point swings in support against them, indicative of the intensity of the disconnect between governing parties and their electorates, regardless of the incumbent’s political orientation. Although EP elections are often considered ‘midterm’ elections in which incumbents fair badly, this year, the effect was much stronger than in the previous elections. In comparison to three governments outperforming their most recent national election result in 2024, ten governments did so in 2019 and eight in 2014.

Figure 1. In EP elections in all but three countries, parties holding national government underperformed their most recent national election result. The largest relative losses were in France and Germany.



Herein, we aim to look across the elections held in Europe this year. Our goal is to glean key lessons that progressives should build on going forward. We mostly use survey data from our own work at Datapraxis. If the source is different, we mention it in footnotes.

One of the most important findings from a close comparative analysis of this year’s elections is that, although there are significant common trends that can be observed, elections are also local in precisely how they are fought, won and lost. Day-to-day issues, themes and concerns matter. Voters are demanding to be heard on these, and progressives will need to listen carefully and be responsive if they are to succeed in 2025 and beyond.

Lesson 1.

Democracy is strong, but we need to tend it in the face of threats and make good on the substance of its promise

Nearly half of the population of the globe lives in a democracy. According to the Economist Democracy Index 2023,¹ the number of countries classified as a democracy rose by a net of two in 2024 – led by Papua New Guinea and Paraguay, which were shifted upwards to the ‘flawed democracy’ category.

1 “Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict”. Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024.

At the same time, the number of people living under some level of authoritarian rule has been creeping up over the last few years too. According to the Economist's Index, a "decline in the overall index score was driven by reversals in every region of the world with the exception of western Europe".² Meanwhile, attacks on the legitimacy of democracy have become the norm of hybrid threats – the European Commission and Hybrid CoE point to both state and non-state actors, including Russia and China, driving an increasing number of hybrid threats to European countries.

In the super year for democracy, there were a number of elections where doubts remain about the fairness and credibility of the outcome. The Russian presidential elections, the Moldovan constitutional referendum, the Venezuelan presidential elections and the Georgian election are key examples. Meanwhile, the rhetoric used by Trump's political movement about rigged and unfair elections – but only if he had not won – has been seen spreading in social media and online forums in other countries as well.

To remain fair, open and legitimate, democracy has to be trusted by voters. Respecting, defending and strengthening democracy itself will have to be a priority for all Progressives and democrats everywhere, hand in hand with our own political project. And we believe the most effective political action we can take to defend democracy is to make its substantive promise real for voters.

Lesson 2.

The voters' priorities must always be our priorities

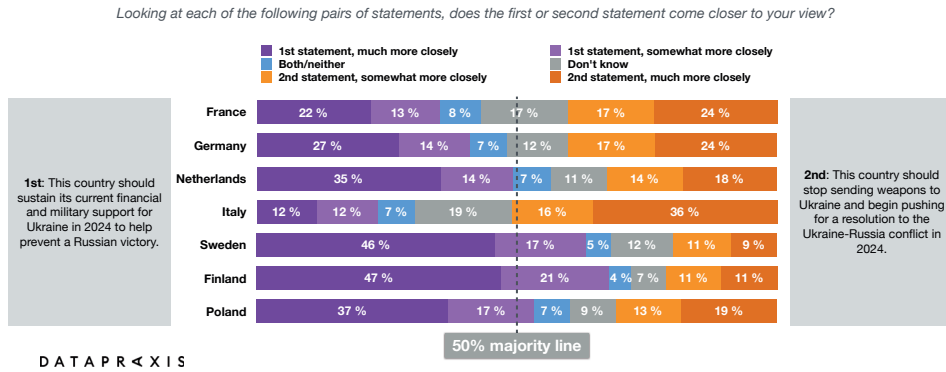
Voters around the world have experienced a painful jump in the cost of living over the last couple of years. In that context, when elites talk about higher-order goals like 'defending democracy', many struggling swing voters hear a very different message: 'we are not on your side, and our priorities are not your priorities'. This is the most dangerous political impression to create in the world right now.

Ensuring we are serving the voters' priorities – and being seen to do so – is a particularly fraught political reality to navigate when the policy and security stakes are high. Polling we conducted in the lead-up to the European Parliament elections showed significant discontent with supporting Ukraine's effort to defend itself (see Figure 2). Although the majority favoured continued support in Sweden, Finland and Poland, electorates were split in the southern and western European countries we polled.

If Progressives lose the argument on why supporting Ukraine is vital to European security, it will quickly play into the hands of the far right and other pro-Russian actors in Europe. They could easily turn an unpopular struggle into a proof point about how the 'ruling elites' are out of touch with the needs of ordinary people. The security and political stakes of keeping the perception of this issue as 'in my interests' for swing voters could not be higher. If the voters turn on the issue, the position of mainstream political leadership could easily be dragged with them, either willingly or unwillingly.

² Ibid. p. 4

Figure 2. War in Ukraine.



Lesson 3.

The far right is learning lessons and catching the winds of change, but its rise is not inexorable

A vanguard of far-right leaders is learning from their own past mistakes. They are detoxifying themselves, especially on the international stage – searching for new alliances, building cooperation and appearing constructive.

Across the continent, far-right leaders have a well-established brand ownership in handling immigration. Now, they are expanding their priorities and rhetoric beyond this to attempt to compete on the economy and the cost of living, weaving these issues together with their own version of common sense – while framing Progressives as extreme ideologues.

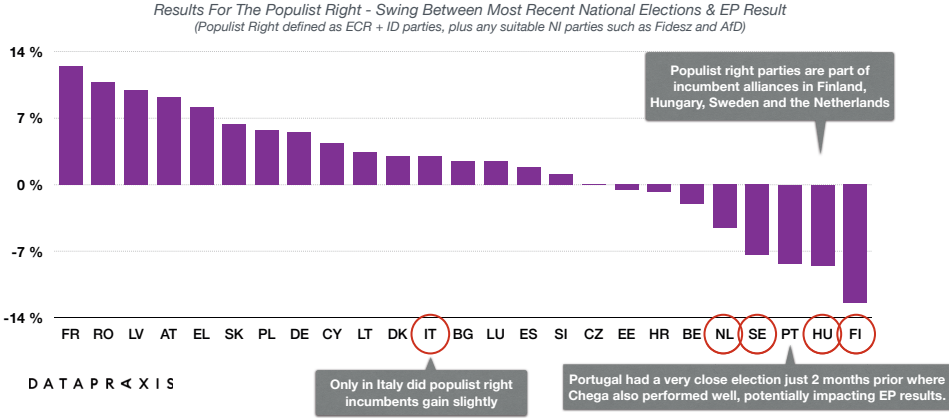
The result in 2024 was that the far right – mostly out of power nationally – was able to ride the winds of change that swept the 2024 European Parliament elections, and grow their support sharply in many countries. This included a double-digit swing towards RN in France (see Figure 3).

But the far right is not inexorably expanding its base. In all but one of the countries where they held or shared some form of national governing power, far-right parties took heavy losses, just like mainstream incumbents. The biggest losses were seen by the Finns Party of Finland, which has carried the responsibility for the gruelling austerity of the centre-right to far-right government by occupying the Ministry of Finance.

The exception to the anti-incumbent backlash experienced by the far right was Italy's Brothers of Italy party, led by Prime Minister Meloni, which grew its support (mostly cannibalising other right-wing coalition party support). Meloni may have benefited by winning the elections in 2022 when the inflation wave hitting most countries was already baked. But she has also managed to find a way to detoxify herself both at home and abroad.

One of the single most persuasive videos we tested in our research over the course of

Figure 3. In EP elections support for populist right parties increased in most countries. Countries where their support dropped are largely those where they are in government or support it, as in Sweden; Italy is the exception.



2024 was a pro-Meloni ad that Brothers of Italy deployed in the run-up to the European Parliament elections. The content is instructive and demonstrates a high degree of sensitivity to the needs of voters, wrapped in a humanising personal layer:

- I vote for Giorgia because she is one of the people
- I vote for Giorgia because I can finally vote without going home. And I also save money on the ticket
- I vote for Giorgia because she believes in those who work in a state friendly to professionals and entrepreneurs
- I vote for Giorgia because she values sport and never gives up
- I vote for Giorgia because she made her way from the bottom
- I vote for Giorgia because she increased my pension
- I vote for Giorgia because she's one of us and hasn't let it get to her head
- I vote for Giorgia because she believes in the value of the land and she has always defended us, even when the Left wanted to impose absurd rules from Europe on us
- I vote for Giorgia because she increased funding for healthcare
- I vote for Giorgia because she defends women's freedom
- I vote for Giorgia because she hasn't forgotten about us
- I vote for Giorgia because she protected my job
- I vote for Giorgia because she helped us mothers reconcile family and work

This ad increased support for Brothers of Italy in our survey experiment video testing by a whopping eight percentage points. It is no wonder that the other far-right leaders rally around her, aiming to learn lessons from her approach.

Lesson 4. Go positive over negative

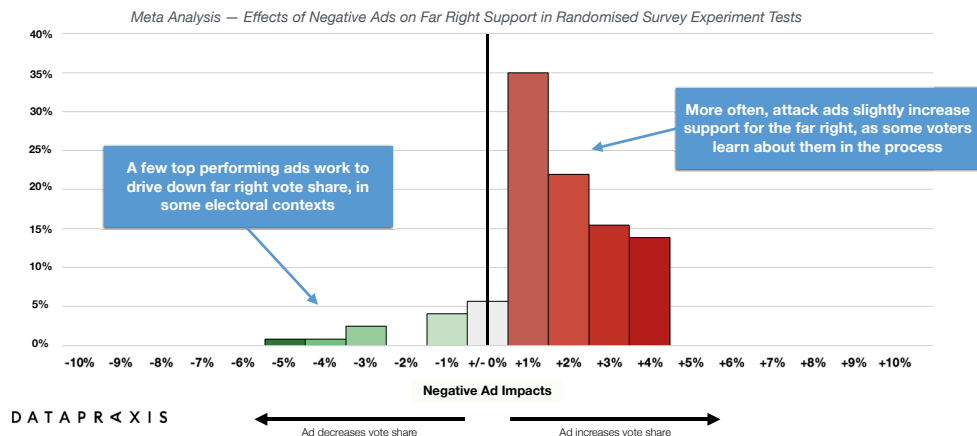
Voters are still responding to well-crafted offers when candidates and parties put in the right work and speak to their needs in the right way. This applies to offers from all political forces, as demonstrated by the unprecedented Left Party success in Finland, sealed by Li Andersson's record-breaking personal vote share, and by Geert Wilders's Party of Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, which grew from zero to six MEPs after winning the parliamentary elections six months earlier.

Over the past year, we at Datapraxis have conducted hundreds of survey experiments to assess the persuasiveness of different videos. We have worked with partners who have been searching for ways to hold the far right accountable for their toxic views and drive down their support. We have also worked with partners who have been testing how to present their own positive offerings most effectively.

Figure 4 summarises the results of tests of negative videos designed to drive down support for the far right. While a few worked, we have mostly found that these generate *backlash*, providing free advertising of the far right's offerings and increasing their support. Importantly, our method here is not based on asking voters what they think of these videos – in all cases, these are the results of randomised experiments that survey participants do not know they are in. Yet, exposure to the toxic aspects of the far right's offerings, and arguments for why its offerings do not solve voters' problems, usually backfires.

This counterintuitive effect stems, in part, from a simple reality: since far-right supporters are a minority, negative videos primarily reach people who were not supporting it to begin with.

Figure 4. Most efforts to drive down the far right with purely negative ads don't work.



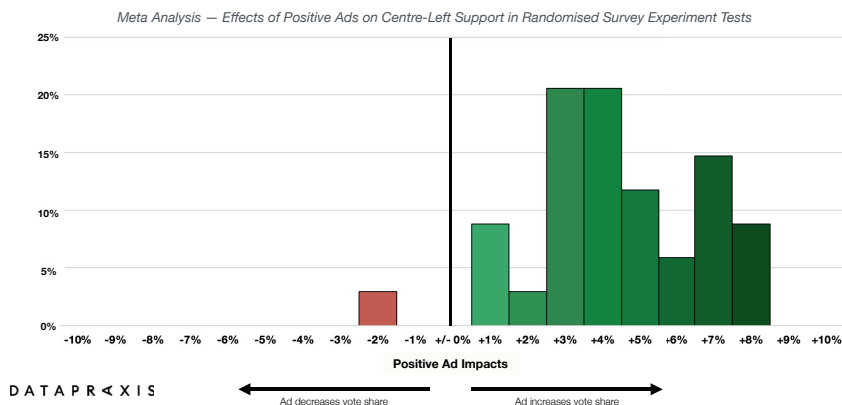
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These videos can inadvertently serve as a megaphone, broadcasting far-right messaging to new audiences, while only reaching a smaller number of existing supporters.

Voters across a variety of countries are hungry for positive offerings – and in fact, highly open to being persuaded to bring their support to parties providing solutions. Figure 5 summarises the results of all of the creative content that we have tested that is positive in nature, designed to increase support for centre-left parties. Very occasionally, these videos generate backlash. But usually, the content increased support for the centre-left sharply, with a variety of results ranging from good to fantastic, depending on the particular message or issue highlighted in the content.

The lesson here reflects a fundamental political reality that, in many countries, voters are seeing a vacuum of leadership and a vacuum of offers that meet their daily needs. But voters will bring their support behind the centre-left when we bring a positive message and offer to the table.

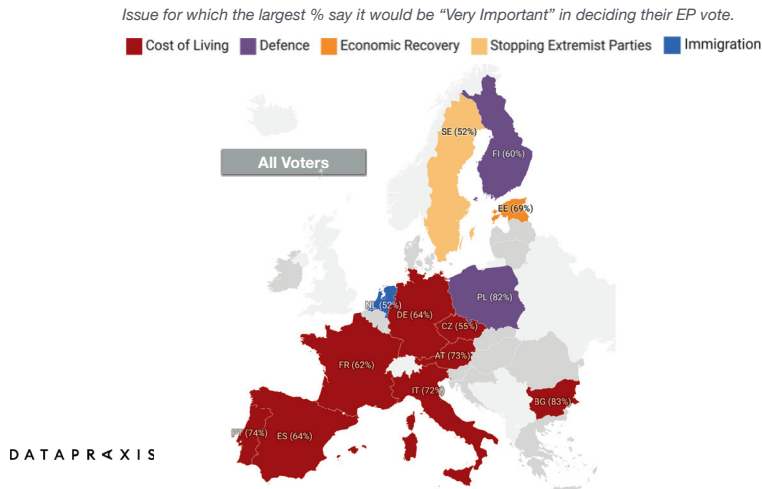
Figure 5. When we test positive ads promoting progressive party proposals, effects range from good to fantastic.



Lesson 5. Fight and win the economic debate

The most important consideration for most voters in 2024 was the cost of living, and this was widely shared across countries and elections. Figure 6 summarises the top consideration for voters in the lead-up to the European Parliament elections, in countries we polled during this campaign. In eight of the 13 surveyed countries, the cost of living dominated, and in Estonia ‘economic recovery’ was the most important issue for party choice. The main exception was that for countries bordering Russia defence was, unsurprisingly, a top issue.

Figure 6. Reasons for vote choice in 2024 EP election.



We believe it remains possible for Progressives to win economic debates and that successful playbooks in this economic moment tend to involve three common elements:

- (1) Acknowledging that things are tough – this is particularly important when in government, but in all cases, voters will not listen to us if we do not meet them in their daily life pain and speak to them from this starting point.
- (2) Advocating for our economic solutions – in a time of economic disruption, voters are less and less wedded to old ideological left versus right positions. We need to advocate and fight for our own practical solutions to the cost-of-living crisis. (Getting caught up in more abstract macroeconomic debates about things like sovereign debt, instead of offering solutions to the day-to-day economic troubles of the voters, tends to be a distraction.)
- (3) Giving voters a clear choice – elections are about the future, and even when voters are unhappy with the status quo, we can win when we demonstrate that our solutions provide a better way forward than the outdated approach of our opponents. Voters are in no mood for austerity right now, and we can create clear and winning contrasts with the centre-right on this.

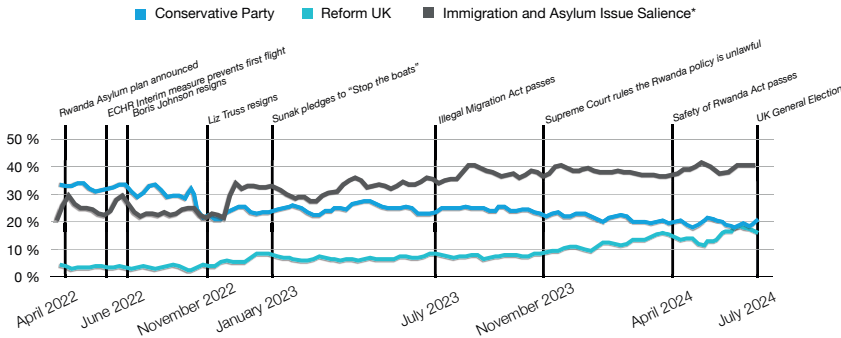
When Progressives succeed, it looks something like Spain. PSOE and Sumar managed to share a signature policy track record on the minimum wage, sell their economic approaches aggressively to voters and beat the trend of incumbents losing – despite the fact that the cost of living remained the number one issue in voters' minds.

Lesson 6. Progressives cannot win on immigration, but we have to neutralise this issue as much as possible

In most countries, the far right has developed a dominant brand strength on the issue of immigration. Raising the salience of this issue generally helps our opponents. This was particularly visible in the UK, where the increase in immigration salience steadily tracked growth in Reform party support (see Figure 7).

To create space for a contest of ideas on broader questions, Progressives must neutralise the far right's advantage on immigration as much as possible. This does not mean adopting

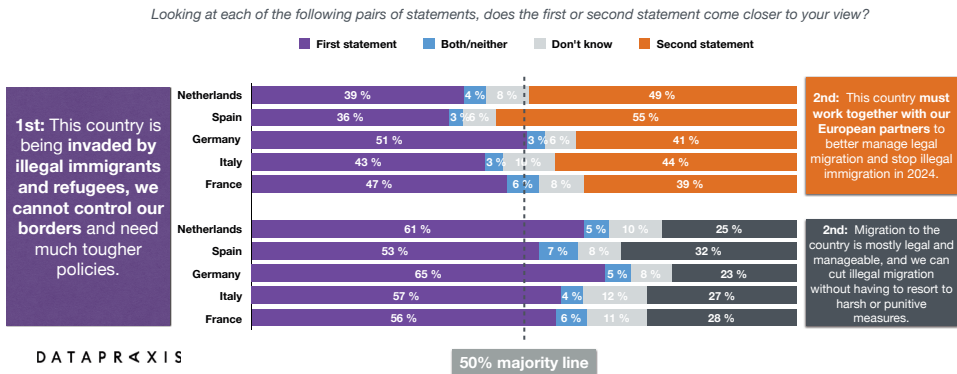
Figure 7. In the UK election, Reform growth tracked immigration salience.



Source: Yougov vote intention and most important issue trackers "Asked as "Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to three."

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Figure 8. Immigration is a driver of populist-right support everywhere, and the far-right invasion message is powerful. Voters are looking for reassurance and strength.



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our opponents' positions. It does mean acknowledging the challenge and framing a position of reassurance and control. Most voters are particularly unsympathetic to left-wing denials of the premise of the issue. But a message that emphasises multilateralism, the rule of law and stopping irregular immigration can hold its own, including when combined with a defence of (better managed) regular migration (Figure 8).

Lesson 7.

Winning elections means persuading voters

To win elections, we must never forget that our first goal is to give voters reasons to support us, rather than our opponents, and persuade them to do so. In a 2021 paper,³ Jonathan Mellon analysed a panel of 104 inter-election surveys covering 18 countries, including Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. He found vote switching (voters supporting different parties compared with the previous election) contributed, on average, three times as much to overall changes in party vote shares than turnout (different voters mobilising to turn out and vote). In 97% of election pairs, the majority driver of change in party vote share was voters switching their support between parties.

We find similar results when conducting post-election analysis of election results and our own survey data. Even in elections with large (and favourable) turnout changes, as in Poland's 2023 election, we see significant amounts of voter switching that is at least as important for the overall changes in vote share. Ensuring our practical solutions for voters, so that they switch to us rather than our opponents, remains the most important strategic imperative we face when campaigning.

This does not mean that mobilisation and reaching out to those who are less likely to vote are unimportant. Reaching new voters, be it young people or groups that have not voted previously, is important for democracy itself and for renewing and reforming the progressive voter base. In fact, we believe the best mobilisation strategies involve offering practical solutions for voters' needs. And in a world of increased economic volatility, we must win over the voters who are changing their minds if we are to win.

Conclusions

Writing this paper shortly after Trump's re-election provided the capstone example of the potency and breadth of voter dissatisfaction with incumbents this year. We saw a similar dynamic across the European Parliament elections. It would be easy to sink into disappointment. Instead, we believe this is the time to pause for clear-eyed analysis, regroup and up the fight for progressive values, democracy and freedom. There are important

³ Mellon, J. (2021) "What drives electoral change? Evidence from 104 inter-election panel surveys in 18 countries". SSRN, 29 December. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3957460

elections as soon as in February 2025 in Germany, with many others to follow. Fighting the rise of authoritarian politics demands listening to what the voters say, thinking clearly about our responses to their needs and making the substantive promise of democracy real. That is a battle that cannot be lost.

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FEPS European Progressive Observatory (EPO) is a platform and a newsletter, which constitutes part of The Progressive Post publication family. It offers analyses regarding the national elections, insights into the post-electoral negotiations, and predictions regarding the socio-political impact of the votes. EPO's articles can be found at <https://feps-europe.eu/election-observatory/>