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## Democracy without comfort: The 2025 European realignment

*Electoral dynamics in six European Union countries in 2025 are analysed, highlighting a deep political realignment termed 'Democracy Without Comfort'. Contrary to fears of apathy, the year is characterised by civic engagement and record voter turnout, demonstrating the enduring commitment of voters to democratic processes. Paradoxically, however, this mobilisation acts as a harsh sanction against incumbent governments, which have been weakened by inflation and geopolitical instability. This illustrates the 'burden of power'. The study also reveals that populism is now firmly rooted in the political landscape, having evolved from a mere protest vote into a pivotal force capable of dictating the political agenda and building coalitions. This phenomenon is rooted in a common matrix of economic and identity insecurity. In conclusion, Europe is entering a phase of demanding democracy, in which citizens use their vote as a means of sanctioning the loss of control over their destiny.*

The year 2025 did not feature a single, unifying European-level election comparable to the European Parliament elections of 2024. Yet, taken together, the national elections held in six countries of the European Union (EU) in 2025 form a quite coherent political picture.<sup>1</sup> These contests – from Germany's snap federal election to Portugal's repeated legislative instability and Central Europe's decisive electoral shifts – paint a picture of a continent undergoing deep political realignment rather than episodic protest.

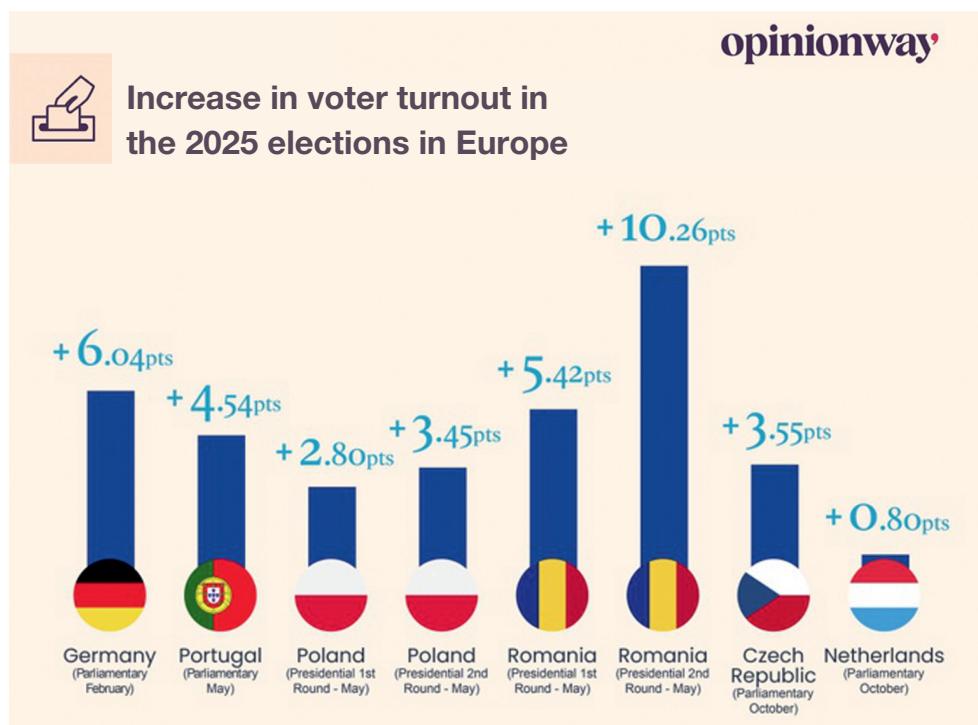
At first glance, the outcomes appear fragmented. Different electoral systems, political traditions and national contexts produce varied governing coalitions and institutional consequences. However, beneath this diversity lies a common structure of political tensions: weakening trust in mainstream governance, weariness with outgoing government coalitions, the normalisation of radical alternatives and rising electoral volatility. In most of

<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary elections in Germany (February), Portugal (May), Czech Republic and The Netherlands (October), Presidential elections in Poland and Romania (May).

these countries, the issues at stake in the election remained focused on the cost of living, but the shadow cast by the war in Ukraine and transatlantic relations also crept into the political debate.

## The civic upsurge of 2025: A contested but vibrant democracy

One of the most striking lessons to be learned from the 2025 European elections is the significant increase in voter turnout. While the dominant media narrative focuses on the ‘crisis of democracy’ or the rise of extremes, the raw figures tell a different story: that of renewed electoral engagement. Far from the apathy or abstentionism that often characterises tired democracies, Europeans turned out *en masse* to vote, using the ballot paper as a weapon of sanction or protection. In all six countries, turnout was higher than in the previous election.



Source: elaboration by the author based on OpinionWay data.

In Germany, for example, the turnout of 82.54% not only represents a significant increase of +6.04 points compared to the 2021 election, but also a historic result, as the highest turnout ever recorded was in 1998. Similarly, the second round of the Polish presidential

election attracted 71.63% of voters, the highest turnout ever recorded for a presidential run-off in that country, and +3.45 points higher than in 2020. Lastly, the second round of the Romanian presidential election saw a spectacular turnout of 64.72%, a jump of more than 11 points from the first round and 10 points from 2019. Only in 1996 was a higher turnout recorded in a second presidential round in this country.

This increase in voter turnout means that talk of the ‘death of democracy’ needs to be qualified. Voters may contest the elected representatives and policies in place, but they do not reject the electoral mechanism; instead, they may even invest in it to their advantage for various reasons. Political fragmentation and the rise of radical parties (AfD in Germany, Chega in Portugal, ANO in the Czech Republic) have had the paradoxical effect of reviving public debate. These new parties are succeeding at both bringing back to the polls voters who had tended to desert them and sometimes also mobilising others against their potential victory. In Romania, civic electoral mobilisation defeated the far right in the second round, proving that the electorate remains the ultimate safeguard.

This attachment to democracy is reflected in the annual data from our survey on political confidence carried out in several European countries. In the four countries included in the 2025 survey,<sup>2</sup> between 30 and 46 points more people think that “having a democratic political system” is a good thing, rather than “having a strong man at the head who doesn’t have to worry about parliament or elections”. Similarly, between 74% and 78% agree with the idea that “it is useful to vote because it is through elections that things can change”.

### Opinions towards different types of political systems and the value of voting

 N=9,092		QSS. I will now describe different types of political systems to you and ask you how you feel about the country being governed in that way. For each, please tell me if that style of government would be very good, quite good, quite bad, or very bad.				
		France	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	
A democratic political system	% Good	80%	78%	86%	75%	
	% Very good	34%	41%	44%	25%	
To have a strong leader who does not have to worry about parliament or elections	% Good	41%	41%	39%	45%	
	% Very good	13%	10%	13%	8%	
<small>Q56. Certain opinions are sometimes voiced regarding the democratic political system. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each opinion.</small>						
Voting is useful because it's through elections that we can change things	% Agree	74%	76%	75%	78%	
	% Disagree	24%	23%	24%	20%	

Source: OpinionWay for SciencePo: political trust barometer/wave 16 February 2025.

2 Political trust barometer Cevipof/OpinionWay wave 16 (2025) survey in France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.

## The burden of power: The difficulty of incumbents

The 2025 election year proved to be a difficult one for governments in power. To begin with, three of the four legislative votes were early elections, resulting from a government coalition failing to hold on to power (Germany, Netherlands) or being unable to escape censure because it was in a minority in the outgoing assembly (Portugal). At the same time, three of these coalitions were defeated at the end of the election, with only the party of the outgoing Portuguese prime minister managing to emerge victorious (although without securing an absolute majority to guarantee its survival). In the current European context, marked by inflationary and security crises linked to the conflict in Ukraine, the exercise of power increasingly appears to be a political handicap. This is particularly striking in Germany, where the SPD has recorded its worst federal result in history (16.41%), the Greens are down by more than three points and the FDP has disappeared from the Bundestag. But the same can be said of the Netherlands, where the, in reality incumbent, Geert Wilders' PVV (the driving force behind the coalition, even though the prime minister was independent) was punished for causing instability. After bringing down the government it supported on the migration issue, the PVV lost its gamble. It slipped to second place with 16.75% of the vote and lost 11 seats. The other coalition partners, the VVD (liberals) and the BBB (farmers), also stagnated or fell back. By calling early elections, the incumbents opened the door to a constructive opposition force (D66) that embodied stability. From a certain point of view, the victory of the PiS-backed candidate in the Polish presidential election over Rafal Trzaskowski, a year and a half after the changeover of government, also symbolises the difficulty for the powers that be to maintain themselves in the next election.

The rejection of incumbents thus appears to be a structural condition of European politics in the 2020s. Voters tend to regard any majority in power as being responsible for a 'permanent state of crisis', regardless of its political colour.

## Populism takes root and normalises

If 2025 is marked by political fragmentation, it is above all the year in which populism has taken structural root in Europe. It is no longer a simple 'wave' of protest, but a political force capable of winning elections, blocking institutions or redefining the media agenda, even in the event of defeat. Although they have taken different forms in different countries, all of these elections confirm their lasting place in European political life.

Populists are no longer just noisy opponents, but also dominant forces capable of winning the day and finding allies. Andrej Babiš and his ANO party crushed the legislative competition with 34.52% of the vote and 80 seats (+8 compared to 2021). Like Victor Orbán, he has transformed a liberal party into a sovereignist and illiberal formation, claiming allegiance to Donald Trump and opposing the Green Pact and military aid to Ukraine. At the same time, the election of Karol Nawrocki (supported by the PiS) to the Polish presidency with 50.89% of the vote confirms the resilience of Polish conservative populism.

In a different form, the two leaders succeeded in forming a coalition that secured a majority. Karol Nawrocki benefited from a massive carryover of votes (87%) from far-right libertarian candidate Slawomir Mentzen to win, reuniting the various radical right-wing parties at the ballot box. Unlike in 2021, Babiš then managed to forge alliances that gave him hope of forming a government, by joining forces with Tomio Okamura's extreme right-wing party (15 MPs) and the new 'Motorists for themselves' group (13 MPs) focused on defending the internal combustion engine.

At the same time, these elections confirmed the deepening roots of populist forces in Germany and Portugal. With 20.8% of the vote (+10.5 points) and 152 seats (+69), the AfD has become the country's second political force and the leading opposition party. The AfD has managed to capitalise on insecurity (knife attacks) and inflation, while benefiting from outside support, such as that of Elon Musk, who described the party as "the last ray of hope". Despite a *cordon sanitaire* maintained by the CDU, the AfD is dictating part of the agenda, forcing the traditional right to take a much harder line on migration. In Portugal, Chega obtained 22.56% of the vote (+4 points), now hot on the heels of the Socialist Party. This result confirms the end of the 'Portuguese exception' in terms of right-wing populism. With 58 MPs, Chega holds the key to parliamentary stability, forcing the centre-right minority government to navigate a perilous course. And although down seven points in the Netherlands, the PVV remains the country's largest party, with 26 seats, in a tie with D66 (centre-left).

Romania offers another example of populism taking root, in a matter of months and under exceptional circumstances. On one hand, unprecedented digital influence operations (aided by Russian interference via TikTok) propelled Calin Georgescu to the top of a first



Source: elaboration by the author based on OpinionWay data.

round, which was finally cancelled at the end of 2024, with almost 23% of the vote. On the other hand, a fusion of populist votes around the AUR candidate, George Simion, occurred after Georgescu's exclusion from the new ballot in May 2025, with Simion securing almost 41% of the vote and a 20-point lead over the runner-up. All this was indirectly supported this time by the comments of US Vice-President JD Vance, who saw the cancellation of the first election as a sign of the decline of "electoral freedom" in Europe. Even though George Simion hit a glass ceiling in the second round and was beaten by Nicușor Dan, the moderate mayor of Bucharest, thanks to a massive civic mobilisation, the AUR has meanwhile become the second political force in Romania's parliament.

More than ever, populism is no longer an anomaly in the European landscape; in many countries, it has become the main alternative or a pivotal force in political life.

## Insecurity in the broad sense as a matrix for the populist vote

In recent European elections, exit polls and post-election surveys have told the same story. Populism is rooted in a common matrix: economic insecurity; identity insecurity; mistrust of traditional parties; and the impression that only a breakaway vote will finally make people listen.

Immigration and asylum are a divisive issue everywhere: it is the number one issue cited by voters in right-wing populist parties (PVV, JA21, FvD, AfD, Czech SPD, Chega), while at the aggregate level it never comes top but is outranked by economic issues, peace or health. Immigration is therefore at the heart of the identity of populist electorates, linked to the powerful feeling of parties or candidates who defend 'people like me'. This confirms the data we collected in four European countries in 2024:<sup>3</sup> anti-immigration attitudes are strongly correlated with political affiliations. When controlling for voter demographics, the highest levels of opposition to immigration are found in the RN and Reconquête in France, the AfD in Germany (all above 90%), the Italian Lega (80%) and Fratelli (86%), and Law and Justice (69%) and Konfederacja in Poland (66%), which confirms the strong resonance of immigration in the populist radical right. In all four countries, anti-immigration attitudes are most prevalent among populist radical voters, making them significantly different from the rest of the electorate, and such attitudes generally follow a monotonic left-right distribution.

But the strength of populists lies in their ability to take a broad view of economic concerns and the destabilisation they cause among Europe's populations. In the Netherlands, housing was one of voters' priorities during the election, and surveys show that this was almost as much the case for Wilders voters as for D66 voters. Chega voters in Portugal also made housing one of their main reasons for voting. Similarly, in the Czech Republic, Babiš was able to tap into economic discontent and the feeling that the Fiala coalition was not doing enough to protect living standards.

3 Political trust barometer Cevipof/OpinionWay wave 15 (2024) survey in France, Italy, Germany and Poland.

The 2025 election year also confirms that the geography of the populist vote often follows the same pattern: an overperformance in rural outskirts and small towns, compared with metropolises that tend to be held by the centre and the left. In Portugal, for example, Chega is gaining ground in a number of rural or semi-rural inland districts, such as Beja/Alentejo, historically a left-wing stronghold, but also in the tourist areas of the south (Algarve), where there is a housing crisis, insecure jobs and an influx of new residents. Here too, the gains are mainly being made at the expense of the traditional parties (PS, sometimes PSD), which seem incapable of responding to the deterioration in living conditions. In the Czech Republic, ANO scored best in structurally weak regions: Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem and Moravia-Silesia often exceeded 40% for Babiš, far ahead of Prague, which is more affluent and educated, where the centre-right (Spolu) remains strong. The AfD is now the leading force in most of the eastern *Länder*, particularly in sparsely populated industrial regions in decline, where ageing, the departure of young people and weakened public services are fuelling a feeling of abandonment that is making people feel insecure. In contrast, the major cities of the West (Rhineland, Hamburg, Munich, West Berlin) remain largely dominated by the CDU/CSU, the SPD and the Greens.

These areas suffer from a combination of economic insecurity (low wages, insecure jobs, restricted mobility, and limited access to healthcare and services) and identity insecurity (resulting from a feeling of abandonment and misunderstanding on the part of urban elites), which are perceived as further threats to their already fragile way of life.

## **The erosion of consensus in the face of the conflict in Ukraine**

The 2025 election year also raises the question of the consensus on support for Ukraine, which seemed to be the norm on the European continent. In Germany, the AfD and the BSW party (radical left) campaigned for ‘peace’ (in other words, an end to support for Ukraine). The AfD has a very clear line: opposition to NATO; an end to arms supplies; the opening of negotiations with Russia; and the resumption of Russian gas purchases. In the Czech Republic, Babiš criticised aid to Kyiv. In Poland, the issue of Ukrainian grain strained relations, and the PiS candidate played on a ‘Poland first’ sentiment. Although he adopted a very tough stance towards Russia, he was also much more critical of Kyiv and congratulated Donald Trump on his ‘peace’ efforts. In Romania, George Simion’s anti-war rhetoric has taken him to new heights. Europe now seems divided between leaders who stay the course and a fringe of the electorate that is more reticent about the cost of war. Admittedly, none of these elections resulted in a pro-Russian, anti-NATO majority coming to power. But the intensity and cost of support for Ukraine often became a campaign issue. Populists have developed several ways of challenging support for Ukraine:

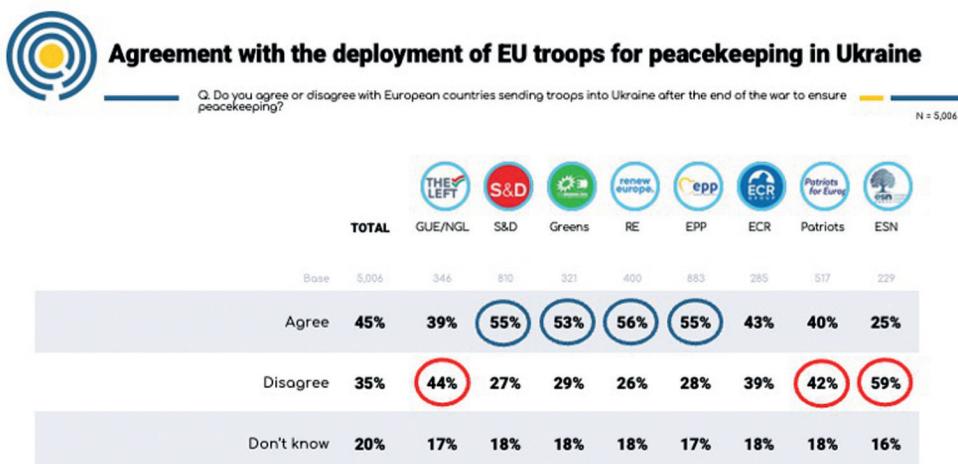
- a ‘pacifist’/‘pro-peace’ register that refuses arms deliveries in the name of peace and neutrality;

- a ‘domestic’ register: ‘our citizens first’ – money, housing, services for nationals before Ukrainians; and

- a ‘sovereignist’ register: denunciation of the ‘diktats of Brussels’, sanctions and asylum quotas, where Ukraine is one issue among others symbolising an overly intrusive EU.

Their electorate is not insensitive to this, as underlined by a Polling Europe survey we carried out in March 2025: 42% of voters of the parties making up the Patriots group and 59% of those forming the ESN are against sending European troops to Ukraine to maintain peace after the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Russia is a player in these recompositions through its suspected interference in the electoral process. The Romanian case shows direct interference (digital campaign in favour of an extremist candidate, massive cyberattacks), with the political effect of strengthening the forces contesting support for Ukraine.



Source: polling Europe, March 2025.

Taken as a whole, the 2025 polls suggest that Europe is entering a phase of ‘democracy without comfort’. While citizens remain attached to democratic procedures, they are growing less tolerant of economic insecurity and the widespread feeling of losing control over their own destiny.

This new situation is not the result of a single shock – whether it is the war in Ukraine or the energy crisis – but rather the cumulative effect of a series of successive crises: the pandemic and its effects; geopolitical instability; and inflationary shock.

In this context, the rise of the far right should not be reduced to a purely cultural revolt, nor should it be seen as a simple wave of protest destined to subside. It is one of the

4 Polling Europe survey among citizens of the EU, March 2025.

possible responses – and undoubtedly the most structured today – to a profound crisis of economic and democratic expectations.

For progressive forces, there are three imperatives to avoid new forms of democratic erosion. Firstly, we must regain the initiative on the economic front by making positive and tangible offers on wages, housing and public services. Secondly, to neutralise rather than ignore the challenges of migration by combining control and humanity within a coherent narrative. Finally, to consider the worried middle classes as a central audience in their strategy, rather than a residual variable.

The future of European democracy will depend on the ability of political actors to construct credible narratives that link material conditions and symbolic anxieties. It is a question of offering genuine protection and reimagining a shared horizon, without tipping over into exclusion or resentment.