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Young people are one of the most important allies of the European Union (EU) because the under-25s led the [record turnout](#) in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament – the highest since 1994 . In addition, [younger people’s support for the EU is significantly stronger](#) than the generations that came before them, a support that is reflected in participation in pro-European organisations like JEF (Young European Federalists). It is, then, very much in the interest of the EU (which still suffers from a notable democratic deficit) to involve the younger generation in campaigns and public policy, as it is conducive to its legitimisation and continuity into the future. Likewise, it is in the interest of European political parties to reach out to young people, as they are a valuable source of votes in the upcoming elections.

Yet this reality stands in contrast to the precarious situation of the younger population. Though it varies significantly from country to country, [the age that young adults move out of the family home has increased throughout Europe](#) as a result of the housing crisis. Moreover, 26.5% of Europeans aged 18-24 are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Bristelle et al., 2024:20) due to precarious work and high youth unemployment rates. If in the early 20th century it was mainly older people who suffered from poverty, today it is the new generations (Palier, 2021). In addition, the mental health crisis has made suicide [the second leading cause of death for European youth](#).

This dire social situation leads to huge mistrust of politics and institutions. Study after study shows that young people are interested in politics but express a profound sense of alienation from the traditional partisan channels of participation and say they have little influence over political decisions (Bristelle et al., 2024). Moreover, while most young people seek to deepen democracy and support gender equality and environmentalism, there is a growing minority, especially men, who are drawn to the appeals to national identity of parties on the radical right, who reject feminist policies and who may even be less taken by democracy as a political system (Cordero and Roch, 2023). The challenge for the EU, then, is to address the demands of young people so that their grievances are not politicised by Eurosceptic forces.

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A large majority of young adults' problems – the housing crisis, worsening mental health, difficulties in finding decent jobs, the crisis of democracy – are not unique to the new generations, but they do impact young people in particular. That is why the most important youth organisation in the EU, the [European Youth Forum](#), is calling for all public policy to contain a “youth perspective” that includes young people in decision-making processes and considers the effect policies have on them.

European political parties and young people

In terms of discourse, youth is not a divisive issue because all parties are interested in attracting the young vote, most share the opinion that young people face a challenging situation, and they all say they want to solve it. However, we can distinguish two main groups according to how much importance they place on youth matters. On one side are the Greens, European Left and Socialists, for whom youth concerns loom large in their discourse; on the other are the parties on the radical right that try to lure young people with their rejection of feminism and their identity-based appeals, but which lack an explicit discourse on the young. The European People's Party and the Liberals fall somewhere in between. They are closer to the first group but less generous regarding the social policies young people require.

European parties are striving to reach young voters through [social media campaigns](#) or [supporting their youth organisations](#), but as far as representation of candidates is concerned, the results are less impressive. Parties have made only a slight increase in the number of candidate lists led by young people, even though currently [only 6% of MEPs are under 35](#), despite the fact that one-fifth of all Europeans fall within the 18 to 35 age range. In France, for example, all the lead candidates except for the Socialist are under 40 and the head of the National Rally ticket, Jordan Bardella, is under 30. Bardella, in fact, is Marine Le Pen's great white hope for attracting young voters as he was the lead candidate in the last European elections at just 23. It is the Greens, however, who lead the way in young representation. They adopted [a resolution in 2023](#) in which they pledged to prioritise young people in pole positions, which has had tangible effects. The outcome is that one of their two *Spitzenkandidaten*, [Terry Reintke](#), is 36 and their lead candidate in Austria is a [23-year-old climate activist](#).

The consensus in favour of youth policies on the part of Greens, Socialist, Liberals and the EPP is reflected above all on an institutional level in campaigns by both the commission and the parliament. Education policies aside (the Bologna Process and Erasmus+ programme), young people were not a priority for the EU until the last legislative term. Following the 2019 elections, however, major institutional efforts have been made to reach out to young adults. The year 2022, for example, was declared [European Year of Youth](#), the [EU Youth Strategy](#) was created, the [Youth Guarantee](#) programme has been reinforced and this April saw the celebration of [European Youth Week 2024](#). Lastly, in line with the [Youth Test](#) proposed by the European Youth Forum, the European Commission announced the creation of a [Youth Check](#) that looks to include the participation of young people in the design and appraisal of EU policies.

But the importance of the institutional campaigns and discourses contrasts with the limited public policy action. This is partly because the EU has no powers over many issues affecting young people, such as the voting age or the housing crisis. It is on concrete policies, moreover, where most division and reluctance arise. One of the most hotly debated topics in this regard is lowering the voting age to 16. In May 2022, the European Parliament put it to the Council of the EU [to lower the age for casting ballots to 16](#), as is already the case in Austria, Belgium, Germany and Malta. While the final decision lies with the member states, the Liberals, Socialists, Greens and Left voted in favour, while the radical right voted against. The EPP was split and only half voted for the proposal.

Another major social policy for young adults, driven by the European Youth Forum, is [a ban on unpaid internships](#). The proposal to call for a directive to outlaw unpaid traineeships passed with broad parliamentary support, though it did meet with opposition from several MEPs from the radical right, and the [EPP tried to reduce it to a recommendation](#), not a legally binding directive. However, member countries are not yet required to apply the proposal in their national legislations.

In short, support for young people is consensual in terms of discourse, a representation issue for most parties and a matter of social and democratic policy for the Greens and Socialists. Paradoxically, while [many young people are drawn to the radical right](#) it lacks a discourse of its own on young adults and their real-world problems. The European People's Party is an enigma; it talks the talk on young people, but in key votes it could lean either way.

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Young people after the European elections

The priority the EU institutions give to young people does not appear likely to change significantly depending on the outcome of the elections, since all the parties are looking to attract the young vote, and the EU's legitimacy relies heavily on the new generations. What is at stake is whether youth policies will be bold enough to address the plight of young people, or half-hearted measures will be introduced instead. Given [Ursula von der Leyen's likely repetition as president of the commission](#), there are two basic scenarios depending on which groups the EPP turns to for support in the parliamentary votes.

The first and most likely scenario is one of continuity. Von der Leyen would rely on the Socialists and Liberals as she has done until now [for social issues](#), and would continue to advance pro-youth policies, though perhaps not at the pace young people require. The [Green](#), [Liberal](#) and [Socialist](#) manifestos pledge their support for policies they were already working on in this past term, such as banning unpaid internships, pushing to lower the voting age to 16, implementing the Youth Check, boosting the Erasmus+ programme or alleviating the housing crisis for young people. While the [European People's Party](#) also mentions the housing problem and unemployment in their manifesto, they only promise to implement the Youth Check. The Greens have done more than any other party to rally around youth, yet [the polls](#) seem to be indicating a setback for these groups in the June elections.

What is at stake in these elections is whether youth policies will be bold enough to address the plight of young people, or half-hearted measures will be introduced instead.

The second and increasingly likely scenario is one in which Von der Leyen looks for support from the parties on the [radical right on social issues](#). This would put a spoke in the wheel of youth policies, particularly those of a social nature. It would also seriously impact two issues that [are of enormous concern to young people](#): climate change and civil rights. Relying on the radical right for support [would slow down the European Green Deal or bring it a halt altogether](#) (see García and Noferini in this monograph) and legitimise all the reverses taking place in democratic quality and women's rights. [Young people comprise the population group whose members most identify as LGBTIQ+](#). They would therefore be particularly affected should the radical right continue to rise.

In addition, both radical right governments and those headed by the EPP with far-right support follow practices that run counter to the participation of young civil society. The government of Sweden, for example, axed assistance for the Swedish Youth Council, [the British Youth Council has announced its closure](#) for lack of funding and [Vox proposed scrapping the Madrid Youth Council](#). Radical right support for the EPP, then, could mean a cut in budgetary provisions for youth organisations like the European Youth Forum, which is the main instrument available to [young people to defend their rights](#).

Ultimately, young people's positive association with the European Union transcends the forces that prevail in the European Parliament or who heads the commission, as it is a structural element of the EU. However, young Europeans are in an extremely difficult situation and, therefore, what is at stake in the upcoming elections is not whether they will be supported or not, but rather whether they will be supported with the sufficient strength and speed to address the huge housing, labour market and climate crisis challenges they face.

Anyone under 30 has grown up with the European Union and most young people support, uphold and legitimise it. The forthcoming elections will determine whether the EU returns the favour, or it turns its back on them.

References

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Annex: Lead candidates for the various political groups in the European Parliament (2024)

In 2024, the lead candidate (spitzenkandidaten) system is at something of a low point. What began as a mechanism to increase citizen identification with European politics and reinforce the democratic nature of the process has now become a target of criticism from the Eurosceptic parties, who decline to take part and nominate a candidate.



■ **URSULA VON DER LEYEN**

(65 years)
Belgium, October 8th, 1958.

Party: Christian Democratic Union of Germany.
The current European Commission president is seeking a second term in the post and focusing her attention on defence, a subject she knows well having been German defence minister in Angela Merkel's government, where she also held two other portfolios between 2005 and 2019.



■ **NICOLAS SCHMIT**

(71 years)
Luxembourg, December 10th, 1953.

Party: Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party.
The current European commissioner for employment and social rights has been chosen to lead the social democrats' campaign. Previously, he served as a minister in the Juncker government in his country.



■ **BAS EICKHOUT**

(48 years)
Netherlands, October 8th, 1976.

Party: Green Party.
Trained in chemistry and environmental science, he was a researcher at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands before officially entering politics. In 2019, he was the Greens' lead candidate alongside Ska Keller. This time, he will form a duo with Terry Reintke.



■ **TERRY REINTKE**

(36 years)
Germany, May 9th, 1987.
Party: Alliance 90/The Greens.

This political scientist, who studied at the Free University of Berlin, was a political advisor and served as the spokesperson of the Federation of Young European Greens between 2011 and 2013. In the European Parliament, she represents her group in the parliament intergroups on LGBTI rights, anticorruption and trade unions.



■ **WALTER BAIER**

(70 years)
Austria, February 9th, 1954.

Party: Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ).
An economist by training and seasoned in antifascist and pacifist activism, Baier was elected president of The Left group in December 2022. On this occasion, he was the group's only contender for lead candidate.



■ **The liberals from Renew Europe** will not be following the procedure of nominating a lead candidate, though they are opting for a joint platform called Renew Europe Now. The candidates will be Sandro Gozi (aged 56, from Italy's Italia Viva), Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmerman (aged 66, from the Free Democratic Party of Germany) and Valérie Hayer from France (aged 38, Renaissance), the current president of the Renew Europe group in the parliament.



■ **ANDERS VISTISEN**

(37 years)
Denmark, November 12th, 1987.

Party: Danish People's Party
While the ID group rejects the lead candidate system, it has nominated this Danish far-right MEP (and current leader of the group) to represent it in the pre-election debates among candidates.



■ **No candidate**

The ECR group is opposed to the lead candidate system and therefore declines to nominate any candidate.

■ **OTHER LEAD CANDIDATES**

As well as the main parliamentary groups, there are other political parties that nominate their own lead candidates

■ **European Free Alliance:**

MAYLIS ROSSBERG
(Germany, 23 years)
and RAÛL ROMEVA
(Spain, 52 years).

■ **European Christian Political Movement:**

VALERIU GHILEȚCHI
(Moldova, 64 years).

Source: Compiled by CIDOB.

