

Europe on the Ballot: What Happened to the Green Wave?

Article by Filipe Henriques

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Five years after the green surge in northwestern Europe, polls show that entering government coalitions at the national level did not pay off in terms of voter support. While Greens seem set to grow in other parts of Europe, maintaining consensus will require ambitious climate and social agendas, and the courage to give up power if holding on to it becomes incompatible with green values.

Five years ago, Greens went into the European elections on the crest of a “green wave”. In the autumn of the previous year, they had made significant gains in Luxembourg, Germany, and Belgium. The 2019 European elections confirmed that momentum: Greens became the second largest party in Germany and the third in France, Denmark, Ireland, and Luxembourg. Across most of northwestern Europe, they doubled their European Parliament seats. In subsequent national elections, they kept achieving historic results, which allowed them to enter several coalition governments – Finland in 2019, Austria, Belgium, and Ireland in 2020, Germany in 2021. In Luxembourg and Sweden, they had already been in power since 2013 and 2014 respectively. Greens grew in other parts of Europe too, joining governments in Spain (2020), Montenegro (2020), and Bulgaria (2021). In 2023, Poland and Latvia were added to the list.

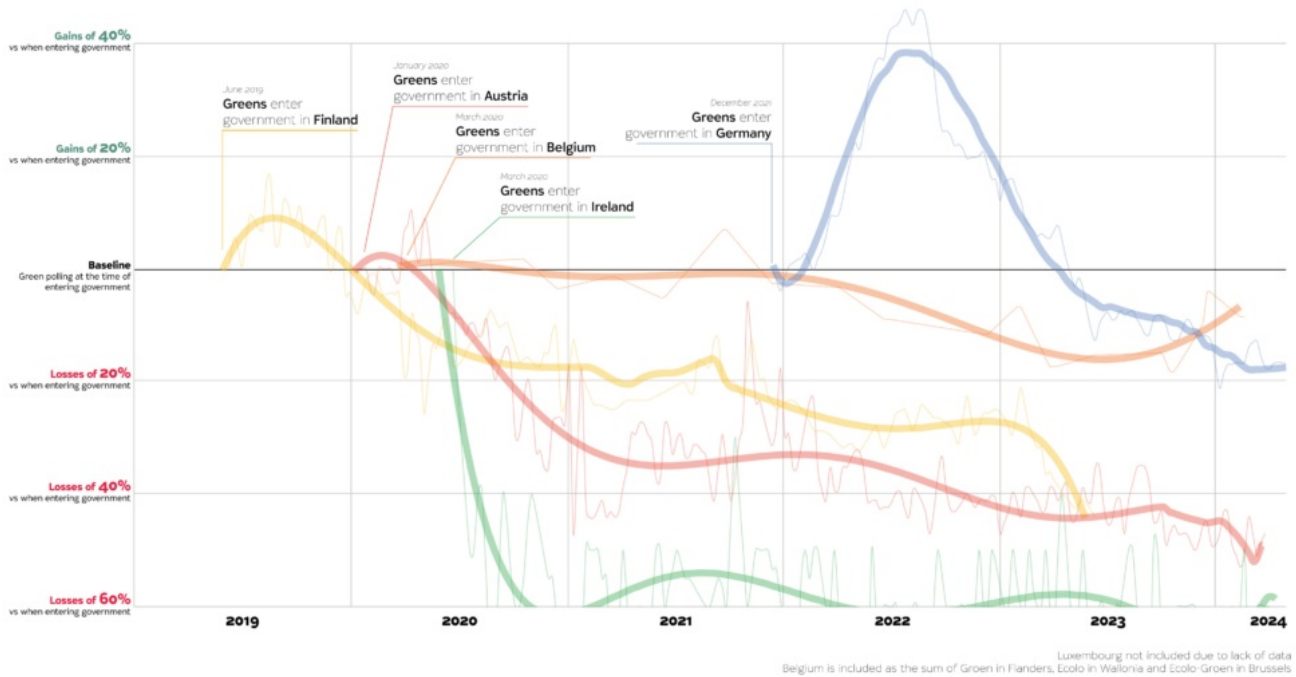
These weren't the first experiences in government for the Greens. In 1995, the Finnish Greens became the first European Green Party (EGP) member to enter national government, followed by the Italian, French, and German Greens in the late 1990s.

For the Greens, being in power has historically meant losing votes. Things were no different for the “green wave” parties: all Greens in government lost support after joining power. The reasons and timing were not the same everywhere. As soon as the Irish Greens joined the national government in 2020, they lost almost half of their support. This was perhaps due to the lingering memory of the financial crisis years, when the party had been forced into approving drastic austerity measures, losing all seats in the following election. In most other cases, however, Green parties experienced an electoral bump or remained stable at the start of government, with a decline coming later on.

Green Wave in Government
Change in electoral support after joining government

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■ Finland: Vihreät - de Gröna
■ Ireland: Green Party / Comhaontas Glas
■ Austria: Die Grünen - Die Grüne Alternative
■ Germany: Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
■ Belgium: Groen + Ecolo



This decline is especially important in view of the European elections in June, as the countries of northwestern Europe make up most of the “green wall”: in 2019, all but one of the Green members of the European Parliament were elected in this region. In 2014, it was all but two. This year, Greens can expect some gains in southern and eastern Europe, but much of their electoral performance will once again depend on their northwestern strongholds. Five years after the “green wave”, are they still holding?

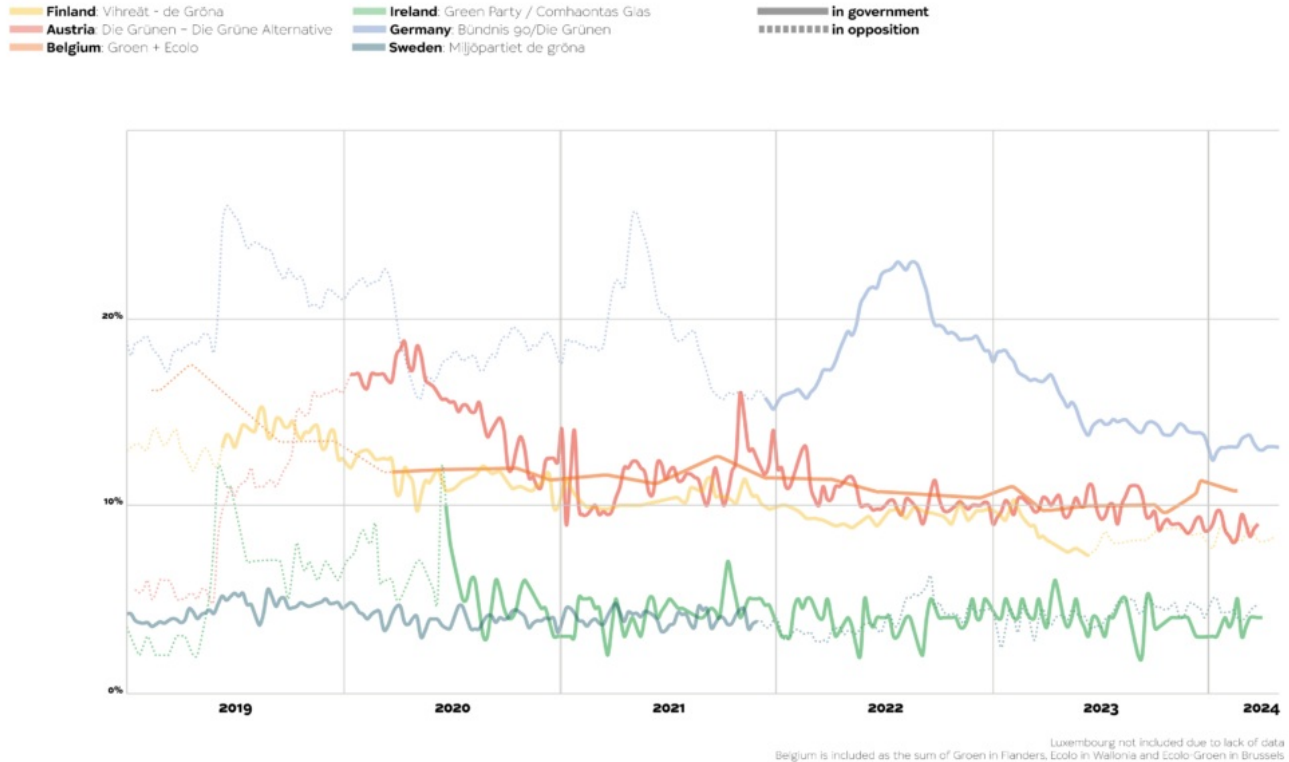
In Germany, home to the biggest EGP member party since 2004, Greens are expected to lose seats. Projections suggest Germany could elect 15 MEPs this year, down from 21 in 2019. In Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden, polls suggest Greens could lose up to 6 of the 14 seats they won in 2019.

As a progressive pro-European force, Greens have always performed better in European elections than in national polls, so doom scenarios are unlikely to materialise. But the success of 2019 was partly fuelled by an extraordinary wave of youth and climate mobilisation across the continent which is largely absent this year. Add the electoral losses associated with being in government in several EU countries and the anti-green backlash normalised by the centre-right European People’s Party, and you have the recipe for a more negative result in 2024.

Green Wave in Government

Change in electoral support in the 2019-2024 period

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This overall picture inevitably raises the question: Is it wise for Greens to enter government and push for reform, even if it means having to compromise on their values and losing electoral support? Or is it better to remain in opposition, at the risk of having no role in crucial political decisions but potentially growing stronger for the next election?

This is certainly not the first time the Greens have been faced with this dilemma. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, some Green parties had harsh internal debates over the issue. Purists argued that the capitalist system we live in is so flawed and broken that there is no point in joining a government to put band-aids on it. Pragmatists claimed that entering government was the only way to change that system. By 2000, the Greens were in government in Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, and Finland. That debate was so strongly won by one side, that in many cases joining a government became a goal in itself, without asking the question, “What are we in government for?”.

In many cases, including after the “green wave”, Greens have failed to prove to their voters that they have achieved enough positive change to justify being in government. While swift climate action might have been enough to retain voters in 2019, the social crisis caused by the pandemic and war at the gates of Europe has shifted the worries of citizens. Any progressive force wishing to stay in power needs to show that it is pushing government policy enough on both the social and climate fronts. At the Spanish elections in July 2023, the green-left platform Sumar achieved a great result by showing voters how it had delivered a significant increase in the minimum wage and a sharp decrease in unemployment while promising that it would accomplish more if it remained in government – a reduction of working hours, taxes on the banking sector, more public housing, and ambitious climate targets.

But besides being good at communicating their achievements, Greens should be able to recognise when those achievements are not enough to justify remaining in government. In April, after the Scottish government made a U-turn on ambitious climate goals, the Scottish Greens pulled the plug by leaving their ministries and ending their support to the coalition. This sense of being in government for a reason, and being uncomfortable enough with power to give up on it when social and climate goals are not met, is broadly lost – not just within Green parties, but in society as a whole. Recovering this sense of purpose might be the only effective weapon against the reactionary wave sweeping through Europe.



Filipe Henriques is a Brussels-based Political Scientist & Analyst focused on European politics.

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