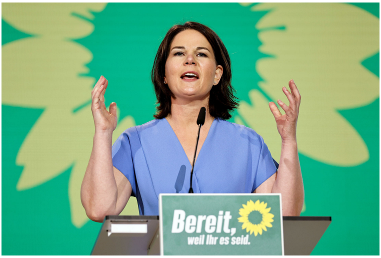
Backgrounder

How Green-Party Success Is Reshaping Global Politics

Once a fringe movement, green parties are increasingly shaping the debate in countries around the world. How influential are they, and what comes next?



Annalena Baerbock, leader of Germany's green party, speaks at the party conference in June 2021. Axel Schmidt/Reuters

WRITTEN BY
James McBride

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Summary

- Green parties developed out of a wave of radical social activism, especially the student protests of the 1960s and the antinuclear movement of the 1970s and 80s.
- Their entrance into mainstream politics, especially in Europe, gave them significant influence but revealed divisions over nonviolence, energy policy, and economics.
- Greens are now seeing their support grow in many countries as climate becomes a top issue among voters, but the implications for the future of global politics are unclear.

Introduction

Green parties—once seen as radical outsiders—have increasingly claimed a place in mainstream politics, especially in Europe. Greens around the world have evolved from single-issue environmentalists into broad-based political parties capable of winning elections and serving at the highest levels of government.

With climate change a pressing issue and traditional parties losing support to various alternatives, greens are positioned to play a greater role than ever. In Germany, the world's fourth largest economy, they could even lead the next government. Yet the movement remains divided over issues such as nuclear energy, military force, foreign policy, and cooperation with right-wing and populist parties.

What is a green party?

Green political parties reflect a broader social movement seeking to reorient civilization in what supporters say are more sustainable and humane directions. Their environmental concerns began with opposition to nuclear power but have expanded to include climate change, pollution, and industrial agriculture. According to the Global Greens network, there are close to eighty full-fledged green parties.

They also usually encompass broader—but interrelated—social and economic issues. Most green parties have committed themselves to four pillars:

- ecological sustainability;
- grassroots democracy;
- social justice; and,
- nonviolence.

Green platforms generally include opposition to war and weapons industries, especially nuclear weapons; skepticism about global trade arrangements and consumerist industrial society; a preference for decentralized decision-making and localism; and a commitment to social justice, racial and economic equality, and women's empowerment.

As British green party activist Derek Wall argues in his book on green politics, the movement has important differences from both the left and right. Most greens see themselves on the economic and social left, but their focus on decentralization and local solutions separates them from many traditional socialist parties. There are also strains of "green conservatism," which see environmentalism through a patriotic lens and press for market-oriented solutions.

Why are they important?

With greens poised to play the role of kingmaker in some of the world's most influential countries, their choices could increasingly shape public policy and the future of democracy.

Some observers say the health of democratic systems around the world is on the decline. According to Freedom House, a pro-democracy watchdog group based in Washington, DC, the world is fifteen years into a "democratic recession." For CFR Senior Fellow Yascha Mounk, rising populism is fueled by declining living standards and dysfunctional institutions. Meanwhile, some data suggests that the economic and social turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic—and the perception of bumbling responses in leading democracies—has further undermined public faith in authorities.

In Europe, mainstream parties have been losing support for years. Experts say a succession of shocks—including the global economic crisis that began in 2008, a spate of high-profile terrorist attacks, and a wave of migration from the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2015—stoked voters' defections from centrist parties to alternatives on the left and right.

In the midst of this turbulence, greens are further scrambling the political calculus. Their outsider status means that they have been able to benefit from dissatisfaction with the current system while their idiosyncratic ideology attracts supporters from across the traditional left-right spectrum. Some analysts argue that they are uniquely positioned to win disaffected voters away from the far right—especially as, in the case of Germany's greens, they have in many areas tacked to the center, supporting international institutions such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military alliance.

However, questions persist over the impact greens will have on climate policy. Also uncertain are the greens' ability to stick with nonviolent principles and their willingness to form alliances with the far right or far left. In one example of flexibility, Austria's greens have formed a coalition with the conservative People's Party, resulting in a government platform that combines anti-immigration and tax-cutting policies with some of Europe's most ambitious climate targets.

How did they develop?

Green parties have their roots in the wave of social movements that roiled industrial societies beginning in the 1960s. The "New Left" and student movements of 1968 broke with earlier forms of class-based worker organizing, preferring instead radical critiques of industrial civilization itself and utopian visions of life in harmony with nature.

The early 1970s saw the beginnings of the movement's entry into electoral politics. The first green parties were formed in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom in 1972. The UK's PEOPLE Party was the first in Europe, drawing on the ideas of an influential environmental text that warned of imminent ecological collapse, *A Blueprint for Survival*, which was cosigned by several dozen high-profile British scientists.

Timeline: The Development of Green Parties Around the World

1968: Worldwide student protests lay the groundwork for a new generation of radical political organizers, including many future green-party founders.

1970s: Protests proliferate against nuclear power and nuclear weapons, which become a central green issue.

1970

1972: The first ecologically oriented parties are founded, including Australia's United Tasmania Group, New Zealand's Values Party, and the United Kingdom's PEOPLE Party.

1980: West Germany's greens contest national elections for the first time but fail to win any seats.

1980

1983: The West German greens enter parliament for the first time, winning 27 of the body's 520 seats.

1987: The first U.S. National Green Gathering is held in Massachusetts. More than 600 activists attend.

1990

1990: Alaska's green party becomes the first in the United States to achieve ballot access. Green parties in Arizona, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico follow in 1992.

1992: The first Planetary Meeting of Greens takes place in Rio de Janeiro alongside a major UN environment summit.

1995: Finland's green party becomes the first to enter a national cabinet when its leader, Pekka Haavisto, is named environment minister.

1996: Ralph Nader heads the first U.S. green-party presidential ticket, though he achieves ballot access in only 22 states.

1998: Germany's Joschka Fischer joins a "red-green" coalition with the center-left Social Democrats, becoming vice chancellor and foreign minister. He influences the phasing out of nuclear power but faces controversy over military interventions in Afghanistan and the Balkans.

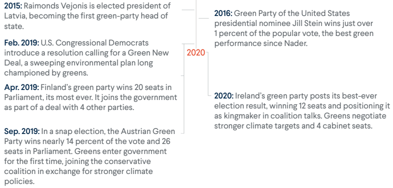
2000

2000: Nader again runs for the U.S. presidency. On the ballot in 44 states, he receives 2.7 percent of the popular vote, the highest-ever green-party performance in the United States.

2001: The Global Greens network is founded, with representatives from more than 70 countries signing on to the Global Greens Charter.

2004: Indulis Emsis becomes prime minister of Latvia, making him the first green-party member to lead a national government.

2010



2015: Raimonds Vejonis is elected president of Latvia, becoming the first green-party head of state.

2016: Green Party of the United States presidential nominee Jill Stein wins just over 1 percent of the popular vote, the best green performance since Nader.

Feb. 2019: U.S. Congressional Democrats introduce a resolution calling for a Green New Deal, a sweeping environmental plan long championed by greens.

Apr. 2019: Finland's green party wins 20 seats in Parliament, its most ever. It joins the government as part of a deal with 4 other parties.

Sep. 2019: In a snap election, the Austrian Green Party wins nearly 14 percent of the vote and 26 seats in Parliament. Greens enter government for the first time, joining the conservative coalition in exchange for stronger climate policies.

2020: Ireland's green party posts its best-ever election result, winning 12 seats and positioning it as kingmaker in coalition talks. Greens negotiate stronger climate targets and 4 cabinet seats.

Source: CFR research.

COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

It wasn't until the 1980s that the first green party went mainstream—in West Germany, a stronghold of green politics. The West German greens contested nationwide in 1980, and then in 1983 became a full-fledged political force by entering parliament with twenty-seven seats. By the 1990s, greens were contesting, and often winning, seats at local, state, and national levels across Europe.

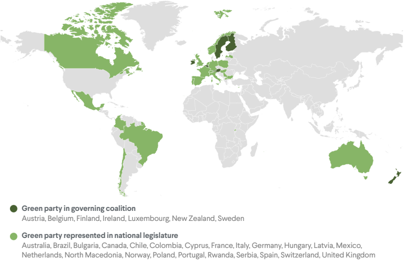
As Wall explains, the early green parties in Western Europe saw themselves as vehicles for the broader protest movements led by the generation of '68—channeling activism, especially against the nuclear arms race and nuclear power but also against consumerism, greed, endless economic growth, and oppressive social norms. As a result, unity was rare, and many factions and internal divisions developed.

Outside of Europe, green politics also gained popularity but at times faced very different electoral conditions. The United States, for instance, lacks the sort of parliamentary system that gives smaller parties a role to play in governing. Greens have won hundreds of local and state elections and now count some 250,000 registered members, but they struggle to make a mark in a national arena dominated by the two major parties. Ralph Nader's 1996 presidential campaign was the first under the green banner, though in a sign of divisions within the movement, Nader was not officially nominated by a national party, only by independent state parties. The current Green Party of the United States (GPUS) was founded after Nader's 2000 run.

What role have they played in government?

Greens have moved from protest parties and loose movements to influential power brokers within only a few decades. Still, although in some countries they have become a fixture in the legislature, in others they remain on the sidelines.

Where Green Parties Hold Power


● Green party in governing coalition
Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Sweden
● Green party represented in national legislature
Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, France, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Mexico, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Rwanda, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom

Source: CFR research.

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Europe. It is in EU member countries that green parties have reached the highest levels of power. In 1995, Finland's green party was the first to enter a national cabinet after its leader was appointed as environment minister.

Greens took an even bigger leap in Germany in 1998, when they became junior coalition members with the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD). Their leader, Joschka Fischer, became vice chancellor and foreign minister. The German greens' first real taste of power highlighted both the party's influence and its major fault lines: Fischer influenced Germany's plans to phase out nuclear power and its opposition to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, but he also faced opposition within his own party over the government's support for NATO interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The 2000s and 2010s saw green parties increasingly break into the European mainstream. Latvia's Indulis Emsis became the first-ever prime minister from a green party in 2004, and greens entered governments in Belgium, France, Italy, and elsewhere. By 2021, with mainstream parties continuing to lose popularity and climate change rising as a voter concern, green parties were in national governments in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Greens have had mixed results in UK Commonwealth countries. In New Zealand, home to what many consider the world's first major green party, greens have won between 5 and 11 percent of the national vote since 1999, and in 2017, they entered the government for the first time. Australian greens have never had more than one seat in the lower house of parliament, which chooses the prime minister. Canada's greens first entered Parliament in 2011 with one seat, which increased to three after the 2019 elections.

United States. U.S. green parties have struggled at the national level: no green-party member has been elected to any federal office, and their best performance in a presidential election was Nader's 2.7 percent of the popular vote in 2000. However, they have wielded influence in other ways. As of 2020, greens held 117 state and local elected offices nationwide, and they were early proponents of a Green New Deal, which became popular among Democrats. The proposal is partially incorporated in President

Joe Biden's plans for carbon-reducing infrastructure, agriculture, and energy policies.

Latin America. Greens have entered legislatures or controlled significant local government positions in several countries. These include Mexico's Ecologist Green Party (PVE), which in the past decade has won as many as 47 seats (out of 500) in the country's lower house and 9 seats (out of 128) in the Senate. Notably, PVE candidates have taken conservative positions on several issues, including support of the death penalty and opposition to same-sex marriage. Brazil's greens are also ideologically mixed: the former National Ecological Party, now called Patriota, is a far-right religious party, while the Brazilian Green Party is more traditionally left-wing. Colombia's Green Alliance has played a significant role in the country's politics: in addition to holding nine seats in both the lower and upper houses of Congress, green politicians have been mayors of major cities, including Bogota, and one of them, Antanas Mockus, came in second in the 2010 presidential election.

Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Green politics have achieved less of a foothold elsewhere in the world. Africa has seen a range of environmental activism, including the Green Belt Movement led by Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, but few electoral gains. Rwanda is the only African country with greens in parliament, where they are one of the few remaining opposition forces to long-serving President Paul Kagame. Many countries across Asia and the Middle East have green parties, though only a handful have achieved representation in government. Japan's party, Greens Japan, was only incorporated in 2012 as part of an antinuclear pushback after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, and its sole elected official is Kazumi Inamura, mayor of Amagasaki.

What are the major debates within global green parties?

Greens have long been internally divided, leading to leadership struggles, splintering parties, and ongoing debates over how to capitalize on growing popularity.

The most fundamental debates center on the very nature of the movement. Some see it primarily as an activist effort committed to direct action and civil disobedience, exemplified by the eco-saboteur group Earth First!. Others prefer a more conventional electoral strategy. This has played out in Germany between the "realos," or moderates, and the "fundis," or radicals. The latter were exemplified by West German green-party founder Petra Kelly, who saw it as an "anti-party party" but whose vision largely lost out to the moderates, especially since Fischer's 1998 entrance into government.

Other notable areas of debate among greens include:

Energy policy. Despite long-standing opposition to nuclear power, some greens—most notably in Finland—are reconsidering that stance in light of the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Role of technology, globalization, and economic growth. Mirroring earlier debates between activists and pragmatists, some greens maintain more radical critiques of endless economic growth, consumerism based on energy-intensive trade and supply chains, and technological approaches to climate change. They call for "degrowth," or a sharp reduction in both production and consumption down to what they consider sustainable levels. Others instead call for "green growth," and are open to technological solutions such as carbon capture and geoengineering.

Commitment to nonviolence. Green parties emphasize disarmament and nonviolent conflict resolution, if not total pacifism, a stance that has been tested by their involvement in government policy. Germany's greens have backed various military interventions and their current platform strongly supports NATO.

Role of the European Union. Most European green parties are pro-EU, but that hasn't always been the case, given the strains of localism and decentralization in their philosophy. Sweden's greens campaigned against the country's entry into the EU, and in 2008 the original Danish green party was expelled from the broader European green confederation over its euroskepticism.

Right-wing environmentalism. There is a small but persistent right-wing brand of green politics that pairs environmental protection with nationalism, skepticism about government, and dissension from left-wing approaches to immigration, secularism, and social liberalism. These groups have largely been ostracized by mainstream green organizations, seen most recently with the Latvian Green Party.

What are the criticisms?

Green-party political foes have long caricatured them as parties of starry-eyed youth and wealthy urbanites. In Europe, greens are working to shed that image to compete for working-class voters. Still, experts say their relevance remains low in Southern and Eastern Europe, where growth is slow and unemployment high, and in many rural areas across the continent. Even in richer countries, such as the manufacturing powerhouse Germany, greens' criticisms of industrial development at times spark distrust. Labor representatives say that greens should find ways to better pitch their policies to heavily unionized sectors, such as the automotive industry.

Some of those concerns were exemplified by the monthslong Yellow Vests protests in France, which were sparked by an environmentally motivated increase in the country's fuel tax that fell hardest on lower-income workers. Green-party leaders say they have learned lessons from the Yellow Vests and pledge strong redistributive policies to ensure climate efforts don't disproportionately burden the poor.

What's next for green politics?

The green parties with the brightest futures in the next several years are the various European greens. Germany, in particular, has been at the center of the broader trends shaping Europe: the declining popularity of centrist parties; the rise of populist, anti-immigration, or otherwise fringe parties; and the controversy over energy policy, with Berlin's pledge to shut down all nuclear reactors by 2022. Ahead of its September 2021 national elections, the German greens are polling strongly. Some observers expect that they will be part of the next government, and that their leader, Annalena Baerbock, could be the next chancellor.

The irony, experts say, is that amid this tumultuous period in Germany's politics, the greens represent stability and continuity rather than the antiestablishment radicalism of the 1980s. "The party is moving from childhood to adulthood," German political scientist Uwe Jun argues. "It is much more pragmatic, [and] radical ideas play a more minor role."

Indeed, while the party under Baerbock is pushing for more aggressive climate targets—cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 70 percent by 2030, up from the current goal of 55 percent—in other areas it is positioning itself as the centrist alternative. The foreign policy platform is strongly pro-EU, calls NATO "indispensable," and is more critical of relations with China and Russia than any other major party. Notably, it opposes the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Germany and Russia, which Chancellor Angela Merkel's government has backed despite opposition from the U.S. government.

In the rest of Europe, meanwhile, green parties have largely become unremarkable features of the political scene, adapting to coalition politics and nudging policy in a more environmentalist direction while proving themselves flexible on other issues, as in Austria. With large and still growing majorities of people in Europe—and, increasingly, elsewhere—viewing climate change as a “major threat” to their nation, greens worldwide could be positioned to further grow their influence.

Recommended Resources

The *New York Times*’ Katrin Bennhold analyzes the competition between greens and the far right for Europe’s disaffected voters.

Amanda Sloat, formerly a Brookings Institution fellow and now a Europe advisor to U.S. President Joe Biden, puts the rising popularity of Germany’s green party in historical perspective.

Loren Balhorn writes in *Jacobin* that Germany’s Joschka Fischer channeled the radical energy of the 1960s protests into electoral influence.

For *The New Republic*, Emily Atkin explains how U.S. Green Party proposals for a Green New Deal became part of mainstream politics.

Historian Nils Gilman traces the development of far-right environmentalism, and discusses how it could play into the current populist resurgence.

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