

## COMMENTARY

# Uninspired or indifferent? EU policy in the 2021 German election manifestos



GERMANY ([HTTPS://EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=233](https://epc.eu/en/search?tag=233)) / COMMENTARY

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*With less than a month to go before the 2021 German federal election, the EPC scrutinised the election manifestos of the six political parties and compared their promises regarding EU policy. Which party has the most ambitious proposals for the EU? What are their perspectives on European integration and the future of Europe? Are there any changes from their promises in 2017?*

*The analysis and extensive table below provide an overview of what to expect from each party. It also reveals potential conflict lines in EU policy between the different parties – especially if they have to form a coalition in the next legislative phase.*

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/German\_elections\_table\_v5.pdf) or below:

Almost all the German parties promote a pro-European agenda. Only the Alternative for Germany (AfD) advocates for a Europe of “sovereign nation-states”, while the Left (Die Linke) criticises the EU’s “neoliberal” approach. But there are also clear differences in the orientation and prioritisation of EU policy among the pro-European parties. Some, such as the Social Democrats (SPD), seem to view it mostly through a foreign policy lens. The Greens (Die Grünen), on the contrary, integrates EU policy into almost all other policy fields due to the close interlinkages between national and EU competences. However, on EU policies, the differences between the pro-European parties do not vary too much. This potentially strengthens the polarisation between pro- and anti-Europeans in the domestic debate.

### **A lack of vision for the future of the EU**

Overall, there are few strategic ideas for the future of the EU. While all parties seem to agree on some form of further European integration, the proposals to improve and reform the EU remain rather vague. Only two parties propose a clear vision for the future: The Greens want to achieve a “European federal republic” in the long run, while the Liberals (FDP) strive towards a “European federal state”.

All parties barring the Left and AfD mention the [Conference on the Future of Europe](https://www.epc.eu/en/projects/Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe~34cba0) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/projects/Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe~34cba0>) as an opportunity to reform the EU. Many parties also mention institutional reforms, often asking for a stronger European Parliament. Two parties – the Liberals and the Left – even propose a new “European Constitutional Convention”. While the Conservatives (CDU) and the Greens refer to [Franco-German cooperation](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Rebooting-Franco-German-cooperation~2e0540) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Rebooting-Franco-German-cooperation~2e0540>), all other parties do not mention Germany’s main partner in their manifestos. Generally, the election manifestos do not focus on how Germany can strengthen bilateral relations with its EU neighbours. Instead, the focus is on its relationships with Turkey, the UK and Eastern Partnership countries.

### **A similar focus on policy issues, but with little concrete proposals**

All parties share a similar focus on policy issues, painting a picture of Germany’s important topics in terms of EU policy. All the election manifestos mention the economy and the eurozone, migration and asylum, and foreign and defence policy. The priorities within those fields vary depending on the parties’ ideological backgrounds.

For instance, the CDU’s manifesto does not seem to single out a particular policy field, covering almost all policy issues instead. But it only provides few concrete proposals. The SPD and the Left emphasise [solidarity in the EU](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications>)

[/Solidarity-in-the-EU-More-hype-than-substance~412d8c\)](#) in socio-economic, migration and climate change terms. The FDP focuses mostly on the EU economy, trade and digital affairs, while the Greens primarily mention the EU in the context of climate and the environment.

Some 'typically German' topics are also mentioned in relation to the EU, such as the proposal for an 'EU army' in the CDU, SPD and FDP election manifestos. The manifestos are surprisingly ambitious in terms of EU foreign and defence policy given the general context in which Germany remains reluctant to engage in military operations.

Several EU policy fields in the election manifestos contain few to no concrete proposals. Clear proposals for protecting the rule of law and fundamental rights fall short in all six programmes. Questions on how to overcome the divides in the EU – both in socio-economic terms and on fundamental values – remain largely unaddressed.

Very few manifestos also mention the European Commission's main priorities: **the digital and climate transitions**. Only the Conservatives and the Greens refer to the European Green Deal and the SPD only once; never by the FDP, the Left and the AfD. On the digital transformation, the CDU, the FDP, the Greens and the SPD mention the Digital Markets Act and/or the Digital Services Act but do not propose much more.

### **No major shifts in policy since 2017, except on climate change**

Compared to their 2017 manifestos, there are no major shifts in the positions of the FDP, the Left and AfD. The Conservatives focus slightly more on climate change and youth. The SDP also shifted from mainly focusing on social policies to the "socio-ecological transition". The Greens kept most of their 2017 EU policy priorities but also shifted their focus from the threat of right-wing populism to safeguarding European values.

The 2021 election manifestos showcase differences in **economic matters**, especially in terms of burden-sharing and the future of the eurozone; **migration policy**, where views diverge between restrictive policies and human rights approaches; and **EU trade policy**, with the Conservatives, FDP and AfD continuing to advocate for free trade, while the SPD, Greens and especially the Left advocate for limits due to human rights and ecological considerations. Other potential conflicts regarding EU policy priorities are not easily detectable from the election manifestos, simply because many manifestos remain rather vague in terms of proposals.



Nevertheless, the parties' different prioritisation could complicate the coalition negotiations. While the Greens have very concrete objectives and proposals for EU climate policy, the Conservatives remain vague, which could mean that they oppose such an ambitious agenda. In addition, certain policy positions are already known to be

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at opposing ends without needing to be mentioned in the manifestos. For instance, energy policy is a point of contention – even if the debates on Nord Stream 2 are likely to play a less prominent role now that a deal has been negotiated with the US to allow its completion.

All in all, the party manifestos for this historical federal election after 16 years of Merkel are rather unconvincing in their takes on EU policy. Of course, the political parties will have to thrash out their policy positions when forming a coalition before said German coalition government can then negotiate its position on each policy issue with the 26 other EU member states. And yet, despite those obvious constraints, the manifestos do not reflect the importance of the EU for Germany. This is also visible in the election campaigns, where the EU plays little to no role.

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*The European Policy Centre will contribute to the analysis of Germany's EU policy (https://www.epc.eu/en/Projects/After-Merkel-A-power-vacuum-in-Europe-or-a-fresh-start-40ef0c) at this pivotal moment in German politics, with a series of Commentaries running from July to December 2021. It will feature views from various European capitals on post-Merkel expectations.*

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EU POLICY IN THE 2021 GERMAN ELECTION MANIFESTOS

| European political party/group  | CDU/CSU  | SPD  | Die Linke  | AfD  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| European manifesto title  | The Friedrich-Ebert-Party and the German People            | Germany: A New Beginning                                   | Germany: A New Beginning                                   | Germany: A New Beginning                                   |
| Publication / approval date   | 22 June 2021   | 17 June 2021   | 16 May 2021  | 16 May 2021  |
| Where is the EU mentioned in the manifesto? (if not applicable, see "no") | Separate chapter of the manifesto, but not of all chapters | Separate chapter of the manifesto, but not of all chapters | Separate chapter of the manifesto, but not of all chapters | Separate chapter of the manifesto, but not of all chapters |
| Topic of EU in the manifesto  | EU is mentioned in the manifesto                           | EU is mentioned in the manifesto                           | EU is mentioned in the manifesto                           | EU is mentioned in the manifesto                           |

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|                                     | 2017 election  | 2019 election  | 2021 election   | 2021 election   | 2021 election   | 2021 election   |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---|---|
| Confirmation of the Terms of Treaty | The Confirmation is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the German people to the EU and its values.  | The Confirmation is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the German people to the EU and its values.            | The Confirmation is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the German people to the EU and its values.                     | The Confirmation is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the German people to the EU and its values. | The Confirmation is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the German people to the EU and its values. | The Confirmation is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the German people to the EU and its values. |
| Changes from the 2017 election      |  |  |   |   |   |   |
| 1. Size & length                    | Some articles in the 2017 text were separated into separate chapters in the 2017 text. The 2021 chapter is significantly longer, with 11 pages instead of 7. | Several EU institutions in different parts of the 2021 programme, in contrast to the 10-page text of the 2017 programme. | While both chapters in the 2021 text are placed at the end of the programme, the 2021 text is longer, with 11 pages instead of 7. | No changes in the length of the EU chapter.   | No major changes in the text or length.   | No major changes in the text or length.   |
| 2. Substances                       | There have been no significant changes in the 2021 text compared to the 2017 text.   | No major changes in the 2021 text compared to the 2017 text.   | There have been no significant changes in the 2021 text compared to the 2017 text.  | No significant changes in substance or structure.   | No significant changes in substance or structure.   | No significant changes in substance or structure.   |

\*The order of the points in this table is independent of the order of the points in the text and their location in the German text.

([https://epc.eu/content/PDF/2021/German\\_elections\\_table\\_v5.pdf](https://epc.eu/content/PDF/2021/German_elections_table_v5.pdf))

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