

Online strikes with the usual suspects: How Fridays for Future has coped with the Covid-19 pandemic



Fridays for Future, which was set up to campaign against climate change, has had a major impact across Europe. Yet the Covid-19 outbreak has forced the movement to adopt new strategies beyond public demonstrations. [Sophia Hunger](#) and [Swen Hutter](#) examine how supporters were mobilised in Germany during a recent online climate strike.

In September 2019, 60 percent of Germans named the environment and climate protection as one of the most important problems, thus pushing asylum and immigration issues from the top of [public attention](#). Climate change featured prominently in the 2019 [European elections](#) and the Greens experienced a surge at the ballot box. German cities declared a climate emergency. At the same time, the national government and its so-called [climate package](#) faced massive public criticism.

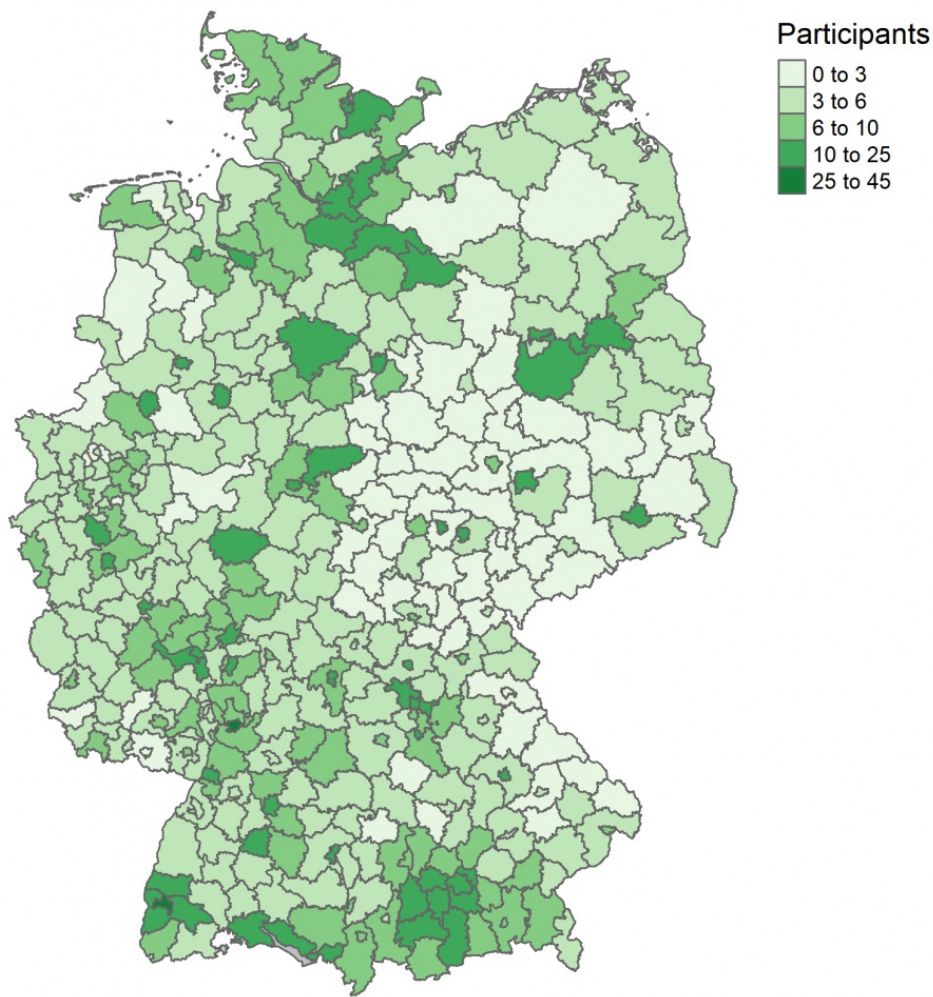
This dynamic is largely driven by pressure from the streets. Inspired by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, young people stayed away from school on Fridays and instead loudly demanded action on global warming under the slogan [Fridays for Future](#). According to the organisers, around 300,000 people in 225 German cities took part in the first worldwide climate strike on 15 March last year. This number rose to 1.4 million during the third strike on 20 September (the day the German government announced its climate package). Although the numbers dropped in the fourth strike in November, Fridays for Future ranks as one of the most powerful social movements in Germany's recent history.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned our lives upside down and limits on freedom of assembly have deprived activists of their central resource: the public space. Yet far from being silenced, protests have instead emerged in alternative ways and forms. In April, [The Guardian](#) listed almost a hundred different physical, virtual and hybrid protest forms: from car convoys via rental strikes to digital meetings and teach-ins. Fridays for Future, together with an alliance of organisations, succeeded in setting up one of the central hybrid protest actions in Germany: the digital strike for climate change on 24 April. Under the banner #FightEveryCrisis, about [19,000 people](#) followed an online live stream with contributions from activists, artists, and scientists. In some places, Fridays for Future occupied the public space. For example, banners from 70 local groups were spread out in front of the German Bundestag.

In the run-up to the event, the organisers had already called for "micro-strikes", for which participants could register by name and location and which were displayed as green dots on a map of Germany on a specially created [website](#). We have analysed these entries to find out where supporters came from and which potential supporters the virtual movement could mobilise. The key question here is whether Germany is really as 'green' as the map on the website suggests.

In the data we scraped from the website, almost 62,000 strikers had registered until the evening of 24 April. Obviously, the largest absolute numbers of protesters came from the larger cities: Berlin (5,564), followed by Hamburg (2,980), Munich (2,256) and Cologne (1,689). However, if we calculate the number of strikers per 10,000 inhabitants as in our map, it becomes clear that Germany is not equally green everywhere. On average across all 401 investigated districts or cities, we count six protesters per 10,000 inhabitants. The range, however, varies from around 40 to under one protester.

Figure: Map of participants in the digital strike for climate change on 24 April 2020



Note: Compiled by the authors.

To help interpret where Fridays for Future is strongest, the following table shows a ranking of the federal states and the top 16 districts. For federal states, the city states (Hamburg, Berlin, and Bremen) score at the top, followed by Schleswig-Holstein, Baden-Württemberg, Hesse, Bavaria and Lower Saxony. At the bottom of the ranking, we find the five East German regions as well as the small state of Saarland, located close to the French border.

At the district level, the German Green Party's strongholds and university towns stand out. The undisputed frontrunner is Freiburg im Breisgau in southern Germany with around 40 protesters per 10,000 inhabitants, followed by Heidelberg with 26.8 and other university cities such as Tübingen, Darmstadt, Bamberg, Bonn and Kassel. The Fridays for Future epicentres also include the second richest German district (Starnberg in in Upper Bavaria) as well as Schwabach in Baden-Württemberg and the district of Lüchow-Dannenberg, well-known for a long-lasting conflict over the nuclear waste storage facility in Gorleben.

Table: Fridays for Future ranking for German federal states and districts

Federal state		District	
Hamburg	16.2*	Freiburg im Breisgau	40.2*
Berlin	15.3	Heidelberg	26.8
Bremen	14.9	Tübingen	21.9
Schleswig-Holstein	8.5	Darmstadt,	20.3
Baden- Württemberg	8.4	Starnberg	19.8
Hesse	7.8	Bamberg	19.3
Bavaria	7.7	Schwabach	19.1
Lower Saxony	7.3	Bonn	18.0
North Rhine-Westphalia	6.2	Kassel	17.7
Rhineland-Palatinate	5.9	Bremen	16.8
Brandenburg	5.6	Lüchow-Dannenberg	16.5
Saxony	5.6	Oldenburg	16.4
Saarland	4.9	Potsdam	16.4
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	4.0	Hamburg	16.2
Thuringia	3.6	Weimar	15.7
Saxony-Anhalt	2.9	Lüneburg	15.6

Note: *FFF-strikers per 10,000 inhabitants

Our data not only show regional differences in the strike intensity, but also enable us to test different explanatory factors for this variation. As an [international survey](#) of climate strike participants has shown, Fridays for Future is a predominantly young, female, and well-educated movement. In a regression analysis at the district level, we include available regional indicators such as the percentage of the population under 30, women, academics, as well as the vote share for the Greens in the 2017 federal election, and the population density.

In general, our findings show a statistically significant correlation for all factors, i.e. the online strike was more successful in urban areas and where more young and well-educated people live. Even the proportion of women makes a (small) difference. Our estimates show that an increase of ten percentage points for the Greens is associated with an increase of seven climate strikers per 10,000 inhabitants. The effect of the proportion of under-30s and employees in academic professions is also strong: five percentage points more for each indicator is reflected in approximately one more person per 10,000 inhabitants taking part in the climate strike.

Fridays for Future's digital strike illustrates that social movements are finding new ways to publicly articulate their grievances despite current restrictions. At the same time, the number of about 62,000 'registered' strikers is significantly lower than the number of people who gathered on the streets of Germany during earlier days of action, and the media echo the following day tended to be weaker as well.

National newspapers (SZ, FAZ, die Welt), for example, published in a nine-day window almost 50 articles on the global action day in September 2019, while the number of reports dropped to only eleven for the digital strike. Moreover, the main locations of mobilisation and our statistical analysis indicate that Fridays for Future was able to mobilise particularly in places where there already existed strong potential. It therefore remains to be seen how Fridays for Future can make itself heard without the possibility of major physical events and against newly emerging protests, such as Black Lives Matter.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Public Sphere](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

About the authors

Sophia Hunger – WZB

Sophia Hunger is a Research Fellow at the Center for Civil Society Research (WZB) and is involved in a project on political radicalisation and protest mobilisation in Germany.



Swen Hutter – *Freie Universität Berlin / WZB*

Swen Hutter is a Professor in Political Sociology at Freie Universität Berlin and Vice Director of the Center for Civil Society Research, a joint initiative of Freie Universität and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.