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Merkeldämmerung: The German Federal Elections of 2021

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Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

In a few days, on 26th September, Germany will be electing a new parliament, the Bundestag. The (normally) 598 seats are allocated every four years based on a mixed system: half of them will go to a candidate directly elected in the constituencies (according to a 'winner takes it all' system) and the other half of the seats will be allocated according to parties' percentages in the 16 federal states. Therefore, parties that did not gain direct mandates will still be represented proportionally in the Bundestag. This combined system also means that it is difficult to predict how many seats will constitute the new parliament as there are the infamous overhang mandates. These compensate for the fact that a party might get more direct mandates in a state than it would get seats proportionally based on percentages and to allow the party to get these extra seats in the Bundestag. Other parties would also gain extra seats to maintain the balance of votes. This is why although the Bundestag is nominally comprised of 598 members, in this present term, there are actually 709 seats. At the same time, parties that do not gain 5% of the overall vote (or three direct mandates) will not be entering the Bundestag. This is the so-called '5%-threshold' and a consequence of the heavily fragmented parliament during the Weimar Republic. Those directly elected would still enter parliament though, but their party would not have the same privileges as those parties that passed the threshold.

Setting the scene

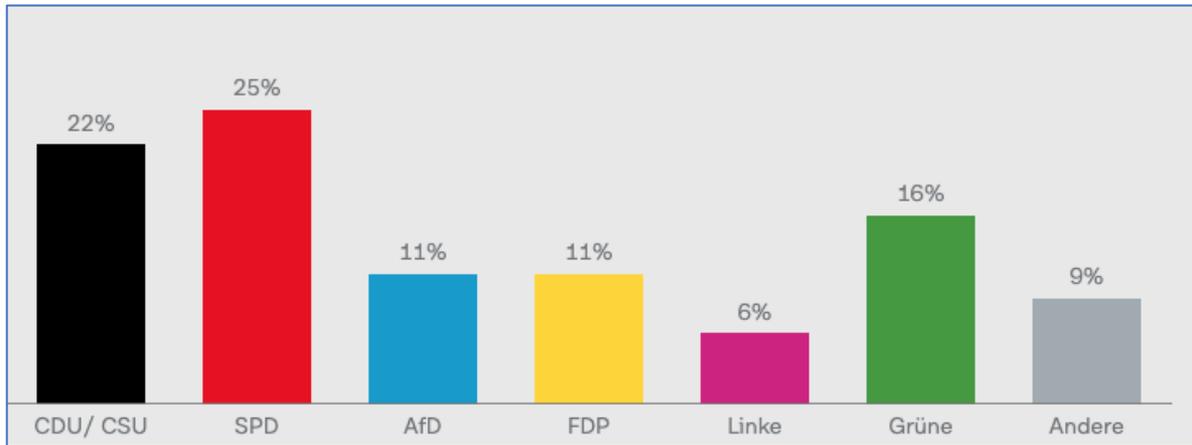
Historically, either the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) or centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU) have led a government since the Federal Republic was founded in 1949. Between those two, a CDU chancellor has governed for 52 years since 1949 and the SPD has held the chancellorship for 20 years. Occasionally, they have formed a government together – a so-called grand coalition. As of late, under the chancellorship of Angela Merkel (chancellor since 2005) the grand coalition has become the rule, rather than the exception. As both parties were losing votes and were thus mostly unable to govern on their own or in a coalition with a smaller party, three out of the four governments Merkel led were grand coalitions. In the last elections in 2017, both parties lost significantly, with the CDU seeing its worst result since the 1950s and the SPD its worst-ever result in elections. While they remain the strongest parties, they no longer have the number of seats they once had. The smaller parties all won votes, with the AfD managing for the first time to enter the federal parliament. One of the interesting outcomes of this year's elections will hence be whether the grand coalition will have to continue – which neither party wants – or whether either party will be able to form a coalition with a smaller party. Traditionally in Germany, a government always had a majority of votes in the Bundestag with no precedents yet of a minority government. However, it is possible, even if unlikely, that the next government might be formed without a proper and official majority. Much will, as always, depend on the eventual votes cast and the complexity of coalition negotiations that will follow.

And the situation is still in flux. One of the most recent polls confirms a rather sudden change in voting patterns:



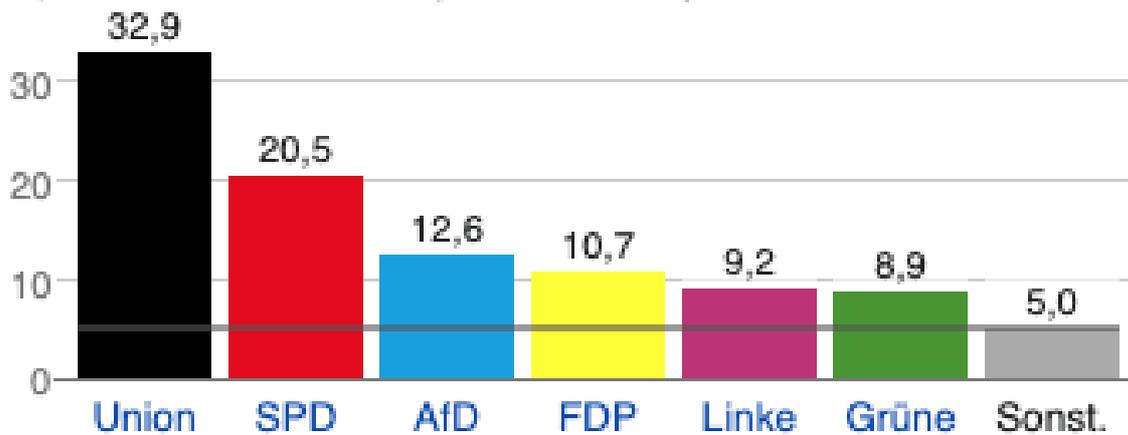
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Poll as of 17th September. Source: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/bundestagswahl-2021-umfragen-100.html>

This contrasts with the outcome of the elections in 2017, which were clearly won by the CDU with the SPD trailing more than 12% behind:



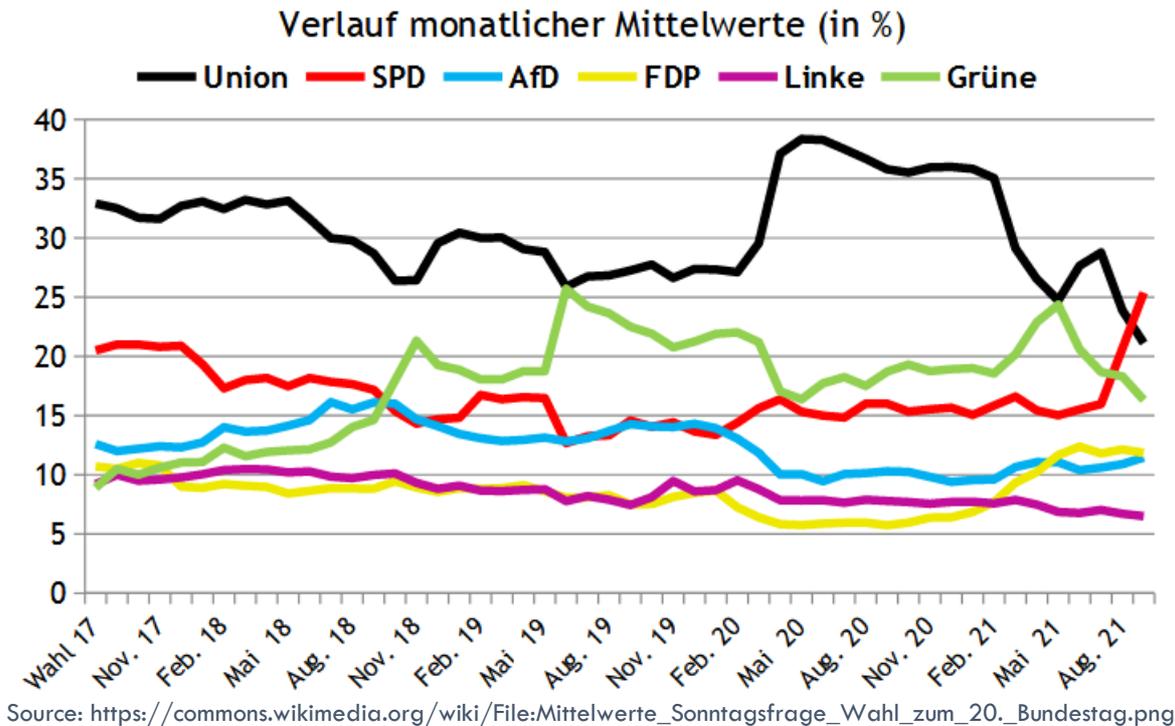
Source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bundestagswahl_2017

However, over the past few months, the CDU, long leading the polls, was hemorrhaging votes while the SPD was taking the lead. The Green Party, which for a while was projected to possibly come out first from the elections, has fallen back to third rank again. Despite this, it still sits at roughly double the vote from four years ago, which is remarkable, also by European standards. They might well be involved in the next German government, from a position of strength. The chart below, showing the developments of polls since the last elections in 2019 shows how fluid the situation is and how difficult it is to make any firm predictions on the next government. As opposed to the elections in 2017, when it was rather clear that the CDU would be the strongest party, no certainty exists yet on what will happen on September 26th and whether the CDU will manage to reverse the downward trend. Its candidate Armin Laschet has reacted by presenting a [policy advisory team](#) but so far this has not translated into predictions of electoral gains. Nor have recent accusations of inefficiency against an anti-money-laundering unit – the Financial Intelligence Unit – and investigations against the SPD candidate, Olaf Scholz ([as minister of finance with political oversight of the unit](#)) led to SPD losses.



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While things might change again and projections can only be so accurate, a record-breaking number of votes already cast by postal ballot means that some of these results are already reflecting final voting behaviour and that current polling trends might be mirrored in Sunday's results. It ultimately depends on how many people will still change their mind until – or on – Sunday and how many people will vote in person.

Currently thus, only a grand coalition would have a clear majority again. All other coalitions would either have to consist of three parties or would have to lead minority governments. The outcome of the elections is still wide open. Few parties have ruled out coalitions with other parties. The one exception being the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which no other party is prepared to govern with due to their extremist and radical nature. The CDU would also not form a coalition with Die Linke (an offspring of the former ruling party of East Germany that then merged with a western German left-of-SPD faction).

Other coalitions are, however, thinkable. An SPD-Green coalition is most likely (and natural) but it would be short of a majority as things stand. A troika – perhaps SPD-Green-Free Liberals (FDP) could be a possibility although it remains to be seen if the overlap between FDP and Green would allow it. Potentially possible would also be a CDU-Green-FDP coalition with the same caveat (including the further question of whether the CDU and Greens would be able to agree on a government programme). While the SPD and Greens had previously formed a federal government between 1998 and 2005, no such coalition has yet existed – at least on the federal level – between the Greens and the CDU. Due to Angela Merkel's centre-left policies over the past decade or so, there might however be enough common ground to explore. With the CDU and the Greens both converging to the political centre as of late, both parties are in principle committed to addressing climate change – albeit with varying levels of activism. In broad terms, they also agree on the basics of German foreign policy, such as EU membership, NATO membership and the need for an army (while relations with China and Russia might likely become bumpier if the Greens are in charge of foreign policy). Moreover, on the level of federal states, both parties have cooperated already (in Hamburg, Hesse, and Baden-Württemberg). A possible problem for this coalition is, however, that the CDU is in a permanent union with one party already: the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). Whether there is enough common ground between this, more conservative group, and the Greens remains to be seen. If it were to materialise, this would probably be a quite quarrelsome government.

Theoretically, the SPD is in a more fortunate position and has more choice. It could possibly form a coalition with the Green and Die Linke, but that would be unpopular amongst some of the SPD and Green membership and might result in a dispute-ridden



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government. Varying levels of unhappiness amongst members and a possibly narrow majority might also lead to a rather unstable government often needing to ensure actual majorities and keeping rebels at bay. A coalition between the FDP, Greens and SPD might be an alternative. The question here is though whether the common ground between the parties will be sufficient, while the majority might be more comfortable.

Mathematically, a grand coalition might make the most sense. It would (based on current polls) have a majority, and both parties have a history of governing together. However, both parties have very limited appetite for a revival of this marriage, nor is it popular amongst Germans. Historically, grand coalitions were supposed to be rare exceptions. In the 49 years between 1949 and 1998, there was only one grand coalition between 1966 and 1969 (at the time commanding over 90% of the seats in the Bundestag and contributing to the 1968 student protests). Recently, these coalitions have become the norm. Since they've formed several grand coalitions beginning in 2005, both parties have lost votes. The SPD seems to have suffered from it more than the CDU but the current trend might also make alarm bells go off in the CDU headquarters. Moreover, with both big parties involved in government, forming the opposition was entirely left to the smaller parties, which the AfD, and to some extent, the Greens, certainly profited from. Therefore, ending the grand coalition phase could - but there is no guarantee - somewhat reverse this trend. If the CDU were to go into opposition, this might attract votes away again from the AfD and condemn it to the rather marginal role, on the federal level, that Die Linke occupies on the left end of the political spectrum. Likewise, an opposition led by the SPD could reduce the support for the Greens and - more likely - Die Linke. If both parties, CDU and SPD, lose further support and cannot get enough votes to form a grand coalition majority government, a triple coalition between both of them and either the Greens or FDP could be a possibility. Yet, given the problems mentioned regarding a revival of a CDU-SPD alliance, the prospects for that are very slim. On top of the mutual lack of appetite for this solution, involving yet another party would only increase the potential for political disagreement and instability. Therefore, a grand-coalition-plus is not a likely outcome at all. If it were to materialise it would probably be a last resort government in case a coalition-forming stalemate could not be broken in any other way; or in response to an emergency (for instance around Covid-19). Even then, it might not last the whole term, or the parties might still prefer new elections.

The jury is thus very much still out. If majorities are narrow for any coalition, negotiations might take a considerable amount of time, and the new government might only be formed in 2022. If no coalition were to emerge and no candidate for chancellorship were to get a majority, the ultima ratio might be new elections. However, given the general openness of parties to form a coalition with a variety of other parties, new elections are not a likely outcome at the moment.

Issues in and around the elections

The uncertainties about the results notwithstanding, this year's elections are remarkable also for two other reasons: Firstly, this is the first election since 2005 where Angela Merkel is no longer a candidate. This has tremendous importance as she is the first chancellor since 1949 to voluntarily step down; not because she lost an election or because of a scandal or extreme party pressures. Quite the contrary, she is still, by far, the most popular politician in [Germany](#) and [abroad](#). For the past 16 years, Merkel has been a constant in German (and international) politics, governing with an unexcited strategy of stability. For better or worse, many Germans appreciate this attitude that was not really guided by visionary policies or narratives of radical change. Merkel, by and large, was a manager of the status quo. Of course, over the time of her chancellorship, some important reforms were made: Germany suspended compulsory military service, decided to phase out nuclear power, and accepted the majority of Syrian refugees coming to Europe during the crisis in 2015. Ultimately, Merkel also did not block plans for the legalisation of gay marriage, although she did not vote in favour of them herself. All of these were not traditional CDU policies, and this centrist, mainstream strategy - borrowing quite a few policies from the left - allowed Merkel to stay in power, and to ally up with the SPD.

It is thus not overly surprising that the party candidate with the highest approval ratings is the one closest in style to Merkel: the SPD's Olaf Scholz. A great deal of his party's recent success is due to him. He has been working with Merkel in several governments and exudes the same unexcited pragmatism. In some ways, he is getting high approval ratings (and votes) because he is the closest to Merkel that the political landscape currently offers. The CDU's candidate, Armin Laschet, had to distance himself from Merkel to some extent, although she favoured him over other possible candidates in her party. But he is trying to leave his own marks and introduce his own style, which, coupled with his rather poor handling of the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis in his own Land - North Rhine-Westphalia - and recent pictures of him smiling when visiting areas hit by the summer floods, did not bode well for him. For those Germans wanting continuity and stability of style, Scholz seems to be the safer bet.

The candidate of the Green party, Annalena Baerbock, who could at some point have been the frontrunner for chancellorship, had her [own scandals](#) around inconsistencies in her CV, lacking declarations of income, and claims of plagiarism in her recent book. If the current trend materialises on Sunday, she does not have a high prospect of becoming chancellor. And while officially, Germans



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do not vote for a chancellor but for a party, whoever is leading candidate of their party matters. In the absence of Angela Merkel, Germans seem to go for the continuity candidate: Olaf Scholz.

However, one should also bear in mind that until a new government is formed and voted in, the current one will remain in place. And depending on the difficulties of negotiating a coalition, Angela Merkel stands a good chance to remain in office well into the next year and to be the longest serving chancellor in post-war history (she has already beaten Konrad Adenauer with his 14 years or 5143 days; and – if she is still chancellor on 17 December 2021 – she will overtake [Helmut Kohl with his 16 years or 5869 days](#)). Do not write Angela Merkel off just yet. She might still be around for a little longer, albeit as a caretaker only.

Secondly, this pinpoints another interesting development around these elections: the SPD breaking its long-term downward trend. Since 1998, when the SPD's Gerhard Schröder took over the chancellorship from the 'forever chancellor' Helmut Kohl and the SPD gained almost 41% of the vote, the SPD has been on a near [uninterrupted downward spiral](#). In the last elections, in 2017, the SPD halved their 1998 vote, to 20.5%. Of course, this was not only a German trend but labour/ social democratic parties around Europe (and beyond) have been losing ground. It is too early to say if this trend is now coming to an end and whether these parties, or at least the SPD, will experience a political revival. If so, one is wondering what the reasons for this could be. Politically, they have not undergone major changes (neither in terms of personnel nor in vision) and their election platform is not overly revolutionary or novel. They have also been co-governing Germany for the past eight years, thereby assuming responsibility for recent policies, too. This leaves the 'Scholz factor' as the most likely explanation, coupled with the corresponding [lack of popularity](#) of the CDU candidate Laschet. In Germany, as in other countries, people matter, and the SPD's uptick at the moment, might not be so much a sign of the party's Lazarus moment; or to paraphrase Mark Twain: the reports of the SPD's death were greatly exaggerated. But so might be rumours about its long-term revival. However, these elections might be what it takes for the party to survive. They could lead the opposition and reinvent themselves, or by leading the next government, they could show to the German population their readiness to govern independently from the CDU. After the grand coalition of 1966 came to an end in 1969, the SPD formed the next government; perhaps history will repeat itself. However, nothing is certain and the SPD could go either way – up or down – after 26th September.

Stability and Continuity

The end of Merkel and a possible renaissance of German (and European) social democracy notwithstanding, the SPD's and CDU's political programmes are not overly visionary or revolutionary. Both parties – while disagreeing on details – are largely aligned on broader visions for Germany around the need for addressing climate change, Germany's role in the world, European integration, NATO and the need for social reforms in one way or another. The Greens are more pronounced – unsurprisingly so – on their policies for more immediate and far-reaching climate change policies and foreign policy reorientation. But as opposed to 30 years ago, they no longer question Germany's need for a military, and NATO. All of this offers enough grounds for political compromise to be found in future coalition negotiations. The FDP, keen on being part of a government as well, will certainly be compromising, too. Thus, a two- or three-way coalition between these parties will be the most likely outcome. An involvement of Die Linke seems rather unlikely now and the AfD will almost certainly not be part of a new government unless polls were completely off. The 'conservatism light' policies of the CDU introduced under Merkel (likely to be continued by Laschet albeit in a watered-down fashion), the less ideological and more centrist stances of the SPD under Scholz, and prevailing pragmatism in the Greens leadership will provide a fertile ground for a coalition to be formed. The relative alignment of platforms might also mean that German politics will not change all that much once the new government is in place. The basics will remain the same: a commitment to Europe, and multilateralism; the continuation of the social political model as it currently exists, and a rejection of populism as recently practised by Donald Trump or Boris Johnson. After all, the biggest change of these elections might well lay, not so much in the politics, but in the people. Amongst the many uncertainties and scenarios, one outcome is fairly clear: it will be the end of an era as the next elected chancellor will not be Angela Merkel.

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