The centre's last chance

Lessons from the 2025 German Election

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Introduction

We live at a time when almost every election in a major democracy is a momentous one. A time when the liberal global order, the welfare state, economy and even the very foundations of liberal democracy itself often seem to be on the ballot paper.

It is for those reasons that the world's attention was focused more on the German general election even more than it usually is.

So much has changed since the last time the vote was held back in 2021. At that moment, it was plausible to believe that social democracy was making a return. Many believed that the era of populism and extremism was dying. As the world edged out of a pandemic, the theory went that as people had depended on both scientific expertise and on government action to keep them safe, so they would turn to the "grown-ups" of politics once more and to those who prioritised the welfare of the majority. Joe Biden won the presidential election in the United States. Anthony Albanese brought the Australian Labor Party back to power in Australia and Olaf Scholz led the SPD to a historic return to the Chancellor's Office, all with strikingly similar campaign messages and a promise to return some semblance of order to the world.

Of course, we now know that this moment would not last.

The inflation and cost of living crises that COVID-19 let rip was further entrenched by Russia's horrific invasion of Ukraine and almost everywhere governments failed to convince voters that they had solutions to the problems they faced. For all of Scholz's pre-election talk of reinventing government to solve the problems that we all collectively face, millions of voters thought instead that they witnessed a government paralyzed by permanent infighting and the continual misfunctioning of the state machine. For all of the talk of "respecting" working people once again, instead the gnawing sense that the political elite live within their own bubble protected from the tribulations that befall ordinary people returned with a vengeance.

This was the backdrop both to the Social Democrats rapid electoral decline and to the rise of the extremes, most notably on the right but also on the left. The results were not as decisive as they might have been, although the SPD has suffered the worst electoral defeat in its more than one and half centuries' history. They were certainly an indication that patience is

rapidly running out. For the centre to continue to hold, radical promises have to be delivered on, however difficult that is to do, either politically or economically. If they are not, then the old assumptions about the power of the centre ground in European politics will look very flimsy indeed.

These are the themes with which all of the essays in this short collection seek to contend. First, our contributors present a detailed overview of what actually happened in the election, highlighting the ways in which disappointment with the existing government triggered a transformative set of electoral responses. Then we examine in more depth what this means for German politics itself, both now and in the near future, looking in part at the possibilities for a revival for the SPD and at the potential growing power of other forces. Finally, we turn to what all of this means for the global order, as Trump seeks to reset the entire world order, and the new German government turns to Europe to seek a response.

We are conscious, of course, that this analysis is just the beginning. Little time has elapsed since the election results came in and the new government is not yet formed. But we do not live in times when we have the luxury of sitting still and watching as things unfold. The crises the world is living through have an urgency and intensity that we have rarely witnessed since the end of the Second World War. The task falls to all of us to try to make sense of what is happening and to do what we can to advise.

A German saying often heard in political circles goes like this: "Those who fight can lose. Those who don't fight have already lost". As have recent days have shown, across Europe we may face many challanges, yet our democracy is worth fighting for.

Marc Stears
Director
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Henning Meyer

Polling Summary: German Election 2025

Catrina Schläger, Jan Niklas Engels and Nicole Loew, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Berlin

What are the main results?

The 2025 Bundestag elections have drastically changed the balance of power compared with 2021. In 2021, after 16 years of Angela Merkel, a desire for political change swept the country. Now, three and a half years later, we have seen a turnaround. After the government's premature end, the 'traffic light coalition' parties have been punished, losing almost 20 percentage points. The CDU did emerge as the strongest party, but it underperformed, failing to reach the hoped-for 30 per cent mark. The AfD, parts of which are considered far-right, doubled its share of the vote and is now the second-strongest party in the Bundestag. After a nail-biting night, it also became clear that the FDP and the BSW would not be part of the 21st Bundestag. This means that parliament will shrink from seven parties to five.

The SPD has been particularly hard hit by voter disenchantment, suffering the heaviest loss of votes, falling to just 16.4 per cent – a loss of 9.3 percentage points. It is the SPD's worst ever result in a Bundestag election. As a result, the SPD parliamentary group has shrunk considerably, to only 120 MPs (compared with 206 in 2021).

While in 2021 the SPD was strongly represented throughout Germany, only a few red spots now remain in some regions. Once again, the SPD achieved its best second-vote result in Emden-Aurich, while party co-chair Lars Klingbeil won the most direct votes in the Rotenburg I-Heidekreis constituency (42.1 per cent). The second vote in the German election system, or **Zweitstimme**, is often considered more important than the first vote (**Erststimme**) because it ultimately determines the composition of the **Bundestag** (the German federal parliament) and influences the distribution of power between political parties in the legislature. Overall, the SPD lost ground in all population groups, particularly among older people (aged 45 and over), blue-collar workers and economically dissatisfied voters. Most SPD voters switched to the CDU, but the party also lost a considerable number of votes to the AfD and Die Linke.

The CDU/CSU managed 28.5 per cent of the vote, an increase of 4.4 percentage points, but short of their 30 per cent target. This is their second-worst result in a Bundestag election after the defeat in 2021. The CDU/CSU will be represented in the Bundestag by 208 MPs, 172 of whom were elected directly and 36 elected via the list. The CDU/CSU has gained ground in all population groups, most significantly among voters over 35 years of age, but also among those with a low level of formal education. It has also performed well in all occupational groups. A total of 3 million voters migrated from the SPD and FDP to the CDU/CSU, while it lost around 1 million to the AfD.

The Greens also lost out as a member of the 'traffic light coalition', winning only 11.6 per cent (–3.1 percentage points). The party has lost a great deal of support among the youngest age group, but many voters with a high level of education and civil servants have remained loyal. In this election, Green voters switched particularly to Die Linke and the CDU.

The AfD has benefited most from the discontent in the country. It managed to double its share of the vote compared with 2021, achieving 20.8 per cent. It will have 152 seats in the Bundestag, 42 of them directly elected. A look at the constituency map shows that eastern Germany has turned blue. The AfD achieved its best first-vote result in Sächsische Schweiz-Osterzgebirge, with 49.1 per cent of the vote. A further 12 AfD candidates won over 40 per cent in their electoral districts, well ahead of the other parties. It achieved its best second-vote result in Görlitz, with 46.7 per cent. In two western German constituencies, for the first time the AfD also became the strongest party based on second votes: in Gelsenkirchen, it came ahead of the SPD, and in Kaiserslautern, it topped the CDU. The AfD was able to broaden its voter base across all population groups, with particularly high numbers among young men, workers and the economically dissatisfied. The party was particularly successful in mobilising non-voters, but former CDU and FDP voters also migrated to the AfD in this election.

A surprise winner of the Bundestag elections is Die Linke, with 8.8 per cent, an increase of 3.9 percentage points. Sixty-four of its candidates will enter the Bundestag, six of them via a direct mandate. The party has thus far exceeded the expectations of 'Operation Silver Hair' (in reference to the silver-haired party veterans), which was launched as a rescue operation in the hope of securing three mandates to get back into

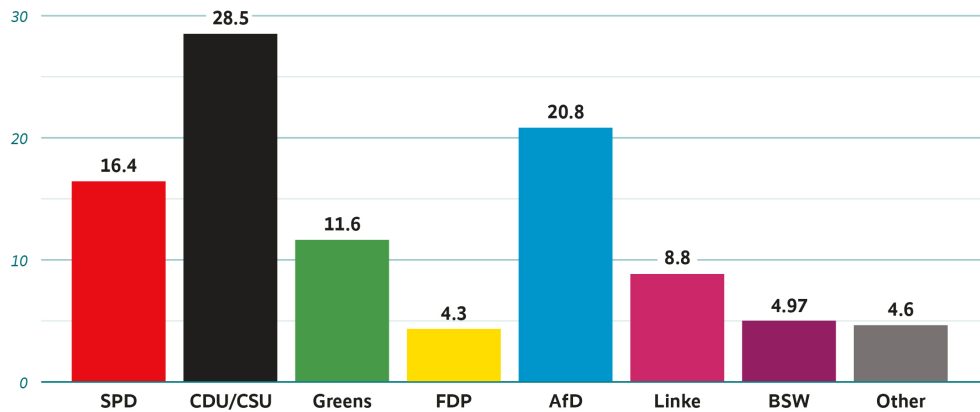## Figure 1: Second votes Bundestag election 2025
Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
	16.4	28.5	11.6	4.3	20.8	8.8	4.97	4.6

Figure 2: Gains and losses compared with the 2021 Bundestag election
Difference second vote. Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
	−9.3	+4.4	−3.1	−7.1	+10.4	+3.9	+4.97	−4.0
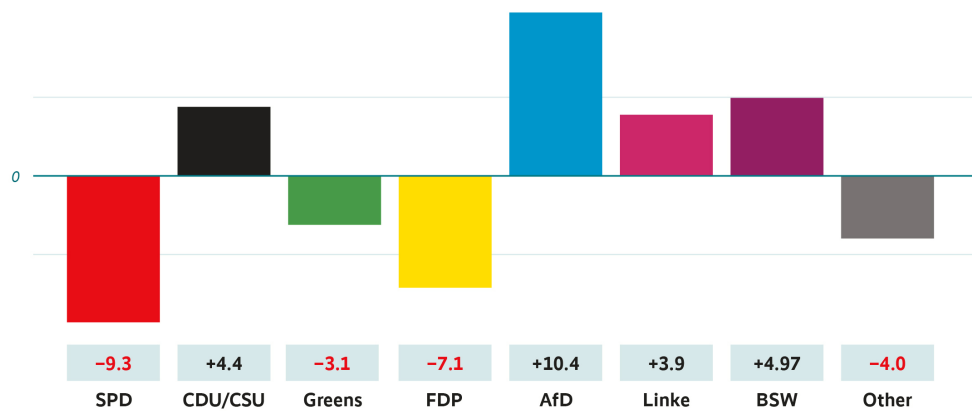
Figure 3: Seat distribution in the 21st German Bundestag
Number of seats. Difference compared with 2021

CDU/CSU
(+11) **208**

Greens
85 (−33)

AfD
152 (+69)

SPD
(−86) **120**

Linke
64 (+25)

SSW
1 (±0)

630 seats
(−105)
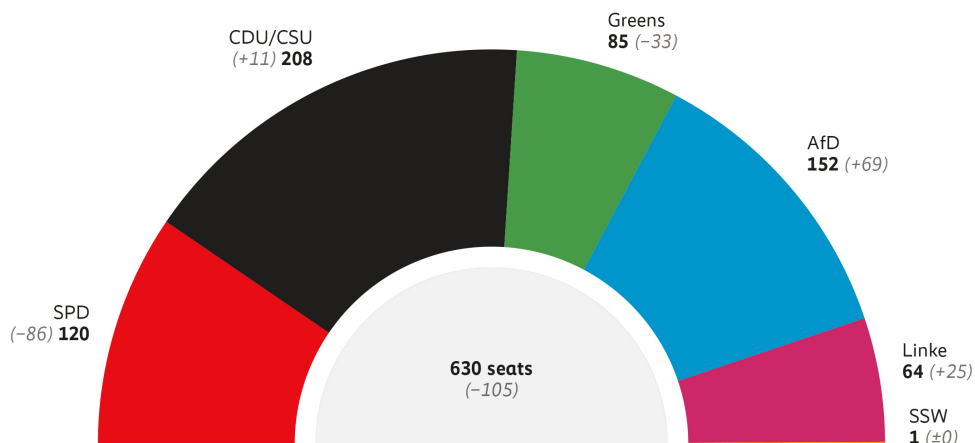
parliament. Gregor Gysi (77) achieved the best first-vote result with 41.8 per cent. He is also expected to be the oldest member of parliament. Overall, Die Linke emerged as the strongest party in the state of Berlin, with 19.9 per cent of second votes. The party owes its resurgence mainly to young, urban voters.

Voters have punished the FDP harshly for triggering the election. With only 4.3 per cent, a loss of 7.1 percentage points compared with 2021, the FDP failed to get back into the Bundestag. Party leader Christian Lindner announced his withdrawal from active politics on the evening of the election, thus paving the way for renewal.

The BSW also narrowly missed out on entering the Bundestag, by around 13,500 votes. The political shooting star of 2024 has suffered a hard landing. After stringing together success after success last year (entry into the European Parliament, double digits in the state elections in eastern Germany, government participation in Brandenburg and Thuringia), it was suddenly brought to a halt. What this defeat will mean for the new party will only become clear in the coming months.

Who voted for whom?

Clear differences in voting behaviour between east and west remain

As in previous Bundestag elections, there were clear differences between people's voting behaviour in the eastern and the western German federal states. The Social Democrats suffered a significant loss of 12.3 percentage points, particularly in the east of the country, where they now have only 12 per cent. In the west, it is still 18 per cent.

The CDU/CSU and the AfD achieved almost identical results in both west and east. While the CDU/CSU improved its results in the west to 31 per cent (+5.1 percentage points), in the east it remained very close to its result in the last election at 19 per cent (+1.4 percentage points). The AfD, on the other hand, increased its share of the vote in western Germany to 18 per cent (+9.8 percentage points) and in eastern Germany to 32 per cent (+12.7 percentage points), making it the strongest party in the eastern German states. The Greens are also traditionally stronger in western Germany (13 vs 8 per cent) and have lost almost the same amount of ground in both regions. Die Linke continues to do better in the eastern German states, where it achieved 13 per cent. But it also improved its results in the west by 4 percentage points, rising to 8 per cent. There is also a clear east–west difference in the case of the BSW, which is not represented in the new Bundestag.

Left-leaning women and right-leaning men?

Other population groups also show clear differences in terms of voting behaviour. While the Union parties came first among both women and men (30 and 27 per cent), the Social Democrats came second among women (18 per cent), while for men the AfD came second, with 24 per cent. Third place in the gender stakes goes to the SPD, with 15 per cent of men, and to the AfD, with 18 per cent of women. Overall, then, left-wing parties do better with women and right-wing parties with men.

A lot of volatility among the youngest

The German parliamentary elections have once again revealed significant age differences when it comes to voting behaviour. There have also been major shifts within the youngest age group compared with the last election. In the 18–24 age group, Die Linke is the big winner, with 25 per cent (+17 percentage points). The AfD follows with 21 per cent support in this age group. Compared with the 2021 federal election, this age group has turned away from the FDP (–16 percentage points) and the Greens (–13 percentage points) in particular. The SPD and the CDU/CSU are almost neck and neck in the youngest voter group, with 12 and 13 percentage points, respectively. In the two middle age cohorts (25–34 years and 35–44 years), the AfD became the strongest force for the first time, while the CDU/CSU have superseded the SPD as the strongest force in all age groups over 45 years of age, making significant gains. For the Social Democrats, this election result continues the trend of an ageing electorate, on average. The SPD achieved their strongest results among 60 to 69 year-olds, with 21 per cent, and among those 70 years of age or older, with 25 per cent. At the same time, they also lost the most ground in these two groups, by around 10 percentage points.

Significant shifts in voter behaviour by occupational group and education

Within education groups, there has been a particularly significant shift among voters with low and medium levels of formal education. Among those with a low level of formal education, the CDU/CSU and AfD are now far ahead. While the CDU/CSU remains at the same level as in 2021, the AfD has gained 16

Figure 4: Comparison of second votes in eastern and western Germany
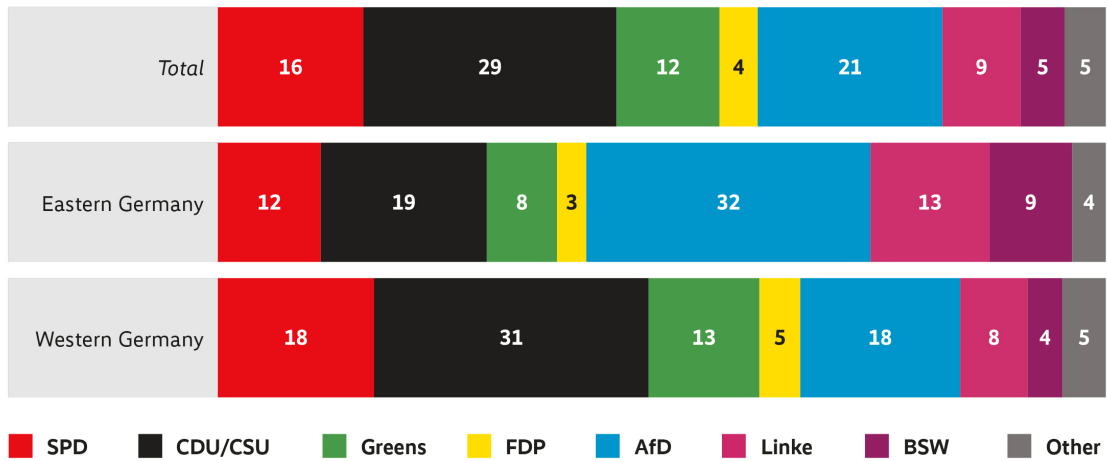Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
Total	16	29	12	4	21	9	5	5
Eastern Germany	12	19	8	3	32	13	9	4
Western Germany	18	31	13	5	18	8	4	5

Figure 5: Comparison of second votes – men and women
Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
Total	16	29	12	4	21	9	5	4
Women	18	27	13	4	18	11	6	3
Men	15	30	11	5	24	7	4	4
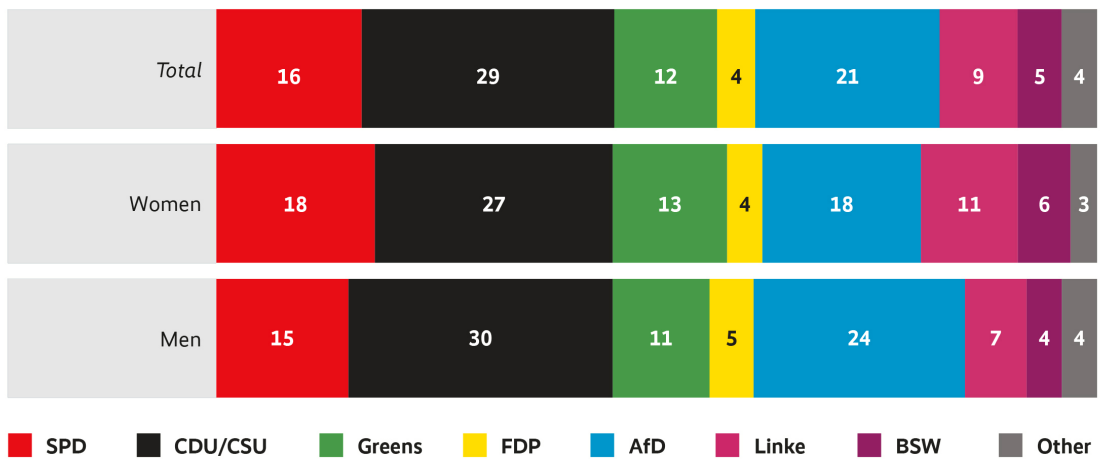
Figure 6: Comparison of second votes by age group
Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
Ages 18–24	12	13	10	5	21	25	6	8
Ages 25–34	12	17	14	5	24	16	6	6
Ages 35–44	13	24	14	4	26	8	6	5
Ages 45–59	15	33	12	4	22	5	5	4
Ages 60–69	21	33	11	4	19	5	5	2
70-plus	25	43	7	5	10	5	4	1

Source: Infratest dimap exit poll
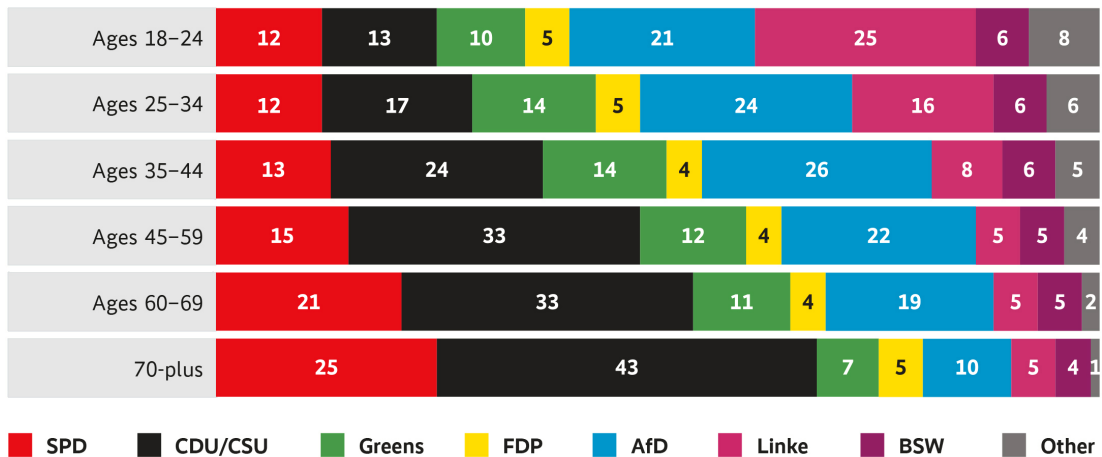
percentage points. The SPD, on the other hand, has lost 13 percentage points and comes in only third within this group.

People's voting behaviour also differs significantly when we look through the lens of employment status. Particularly large differences can be seen among manual workers, among whom the AfD managed to gain 17 percentage points, putting it, with 38 per cent, well ahead of the CDU/CSU's 22 per cent. The SPD has relinquished its former first place among this group of voters with a loss of 14 percentage points, ending up at 12 per cent. Among pensioners, the CDU/CSU (39 per cent) and SPD (24 per cent) are in the lead. The strongest shift has occurred among unemployed voters. Here, only the AfD still dominates at 34 per cent (+17 percentage points), while all other parties have fallen far behind. White-collar voters still tend to vote more as a group. Although the CDU/CSU (26 per cent) and AfD (21 per cent) are also in the lead here, the gap with the SPD (15 per cent) and the Greens (13 per cent) is not as wide. There has been a particularly drastic shift among those who assess their own economic situation as less good or poor. Here, the AfD has gained 20 percentage points and now stands at 39 per cent. The SPD, on the other hand, has lost 15 percentage points within this group. The other parties in the coalition government have also lost a considerable 5 percentage points each among voters in this group, while the CDU/CSU remains at 17 per cent.

How did the election campaign go?

Looking at the averaged survey results since the collapse of the 'traffic-light' government on 6 November 2024, the first thing that catches the eye is their uniformity. It would, however, be hasty to conclude from the uniformity of the poll results that the election campaign was uneventful. On the contrary, it was characterised by a series of dramatic events. Nevertheless, no party managed to drive the election campaign with its preferred issues; instead, they seemed to be driven by events.

In the first few weeks after the collapse of the coalition, the focus was on procedural questions (when will the Chancellor call for a vote of confidence? When will the election be? Do the municipalities have enough time to prepare for the elections?). These questions were quickly followed by bad news from German industry regarding extensive job losses. At that point, party headquarters in Berlin were still convinced that there would be an economic election campaign with parties competing on who had the most convincing plans for saving the German economy. But the tide turned shortly before Christmas.

In the course of ten weeks, there were attacks with numerous fatalities by (former) asylum seekers in Magdeburg (20 December 2024), Aschaffenburg (21 January 2025) and Munich (13 February 2025). The question of the right approach to refugee and asylum policy henceforth dominated the media and public debate. But things went beyond a debate. After the attack in Aschaffenburg, Merz called for an immediate change in Germany's migration policy. The CDU/CSU parliamentary group therefore submitted a Bundestag motion for a resolution to tighten migration policy on 29 January. This was a motion that the CDU/CSU had already submitted to the Internal Affairs Committee in autumn 2024, but it had been rejected. It was therefore clear from the outset that it would not obtain the necessary votes from the SPD and the Greens to secure a majority. A majority could be achieved only with the votes of the AfD – which the CDU tacitly accepted. Understandably, the AfD was very pleased with the adopted motion, as this was the first time in its history that it had helped a motion in the German Bundestag over the line – and this also served as an indication that it was capable of winning a majority. Former Chancellor Angela Merkel went as far as to intervene in the emotional and polarised debate between the conservative and progressive camps, which had made it impossible to find a compromise, and called for moderation.
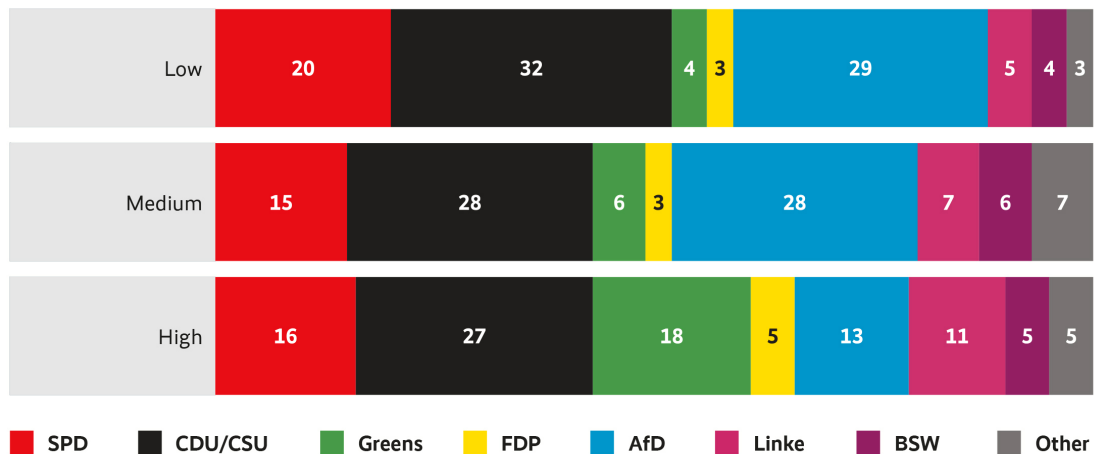
Taking only the January headlines as a yardstick for the issues that determined the election, one might easily conclude that the parties' positions on refugee and asylum policy were the decisive issue. This would be wrong, however. Although the issue ranks at the top of the list in public perceptions of the problem (42 per cent according to Politbarometer Forschungsgruppe Wahlen KW7), the difficult economic situation outstrips it (43 per cent). When voters were asked which issues were most important to them when casting their vote, a completely different set of topics came to the fore. Peace and security (45 per cent) and improving the economic situation (44 per cent) were at the top of the agenda. Social justice followed with 39 per cent, while refugee and asylum policy came only in fourth place, with a significant gap, at 26 per cent. Apparently, there is a significant discrepancy between the media-dominated agenda and what is actually important to people.
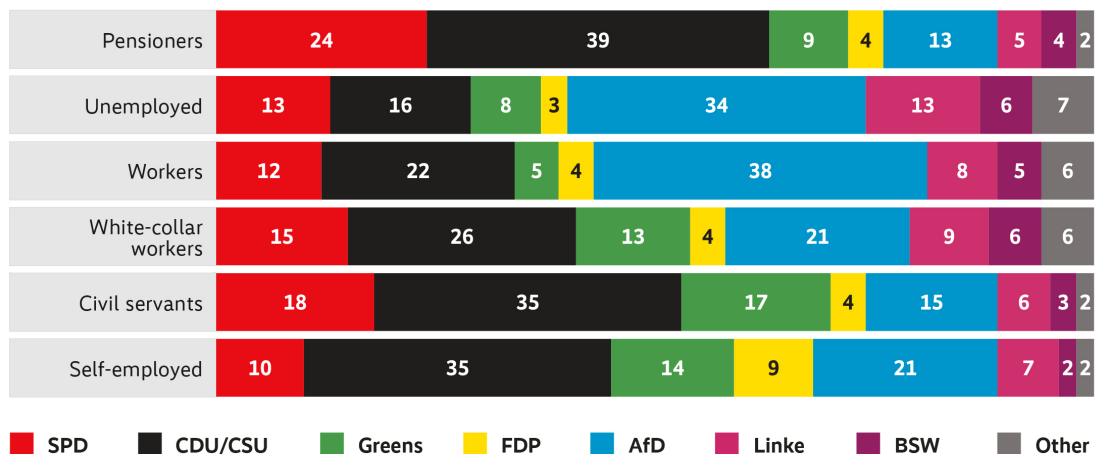
Recapturing the digital space?

Never before has so much been invested in internet campaigning in Germany as in this election: according

Figure 7: Comparison of second votes by formal education
Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
Low	20	32	4	3	29	5	4	3
Medium	15	28	6	3	28	7	6	7
High	16	27	18	5	13	11	5	5

Legend: ■ SPD ■ CDU/CSU ■ Greens ■ FDP ■ AfD ■ Linke ■ BSW ■ Other

Figure 8: Comparison of second votes by occupation/job
Figures in per cent

	SPD	CDU/CSU	Greens	FDP	AfD	Linke	BSW	Other
Pensioners	24	39	9	4	13	5	4	2
Unemployed	13	16	8	3	34	13	6	7
Workers	12	22	5	4	38	8	5	6
White-collar workers	15	26	13	4	21	9	6	6
Civil servants	18	35	17	4	15	6	3	2
Self-employed	10	35	14	9	21	7	2	2

Legend: ■ SPD ■ CDU/CSU ■ Greens ■ FDP ■ AfD ■ Linke ■ BSW ■ Other

Source: Infratest dimap exit poll

to analyses by the ZDF television channel,[1] the parties invested around 6.9 million euros in advertising on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) and almost 3 million euros in Google ads in the last three months. Leading the field in this regard were the Greens with 3 million euros, followed by the FDP with 1.95 million euros and the SPD with around 1 million euros. The fact that young people in particular primarily use social media to inform themselves about political issues has shifted the competition for their attention to this arena.

Advertising is one thing, but reach is the harder currency in the online world. While the AfD has dominated social media with its content in all recent elections, this time the democratic parties managed at least partially to reclaim digital space. On TikTok in particular, the AfD was the undefeated content creator with the most views, but according to analyses by the Bundeswehr University Munich[2] this dominance seems to have been somewhat broken. Looking at the reach the parties received for their posts from the beginning of the year until election day, Die Linke leads the rankings with 14.1 million likes, followed by the SPD with 7.7 million likes, and finally the AfD with 7.4 million likes.

1   See: https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/microtargeting-parteien-wahlkampf-boehmermann-100.html
2   See: https://dtecbw.de/sparta/

A comparison across all platforms by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ)[3] shows that the AfD has invested a lot in building up a large following over the years. The AfD leads on TikTok and Facebook, while Alice Weidel takes first place on Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter. Die Linke and the Greens outpace all other parties on Instagram, and the Greens have the most followers on X/Twitter. Heidi Reichinnek and Sahra Wagenknecht are challenging Alice Weidel on Instagram, and Christian Lindner on X/Twitter. Sahra Wagenknecht is the politician with the widest reach on Facebook. Overall, the analyses show that the field of followers continues to become more differentiated and that the AfD's previous monopoly has been weakened.

What has changed in comparison with the previous election?

It's *about* something: highest voter turnout since reunification

One of the positive surprises of the early election was the sharp increase in voter turnout: 82.5 per cent of those eligible to vote – or almost 50 million German citizens – exercised their right to vote. This is a new record since reunification. During this period voter turnout in federal elections has generally been below 80 per cent. The only exception was the 1998 election, in which voters ousted Helmut Kohl, when voter turnout rose to 82.2 per cent. The lowest voter turnout, by contrast, was in the 2009 federal election, when only 70.8 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls. After that, voter turnout rose slightly. In the previous federal election, in 2021, 76.4 per cent of eligible voters participated: 73.8 per cent in eastern Germany and 77.1 per cent in Western Germany exercised their right to vote.

In 2025, voter turnout in the east was still slightly lower than in the west at 80.3 per cent compared with 83.1 per cent. However, the figures are gradually becoming more equal, with voter turnout in eastern Germany having risen by 7.4 percentage points, slightly more than in the west (+5.9 percentage points). The lowest voter turnout was in the federal states of Saxony-Anhalt (77.7 per cent) and Bremen (77.8 per cent). In contrast, Bavaria had the highest voter turnout at 84.5 per cent.

Voter migration

The question of which party has given votes to which other political camp or has gained votes is of great interest to the general public. However, collecting this information is methodologically very difficult and its significance is controversial. Our analysis is based on the exit poll conducted by Infratest Dimap in selected polling stations or electoral districts. The graphics show the number of votes gained or lost by each party. In addition to the competing parties, there are also non-voters, first-time voters and deceased voters. These are extrapolated values, so the proportions and general trends are of more interest than the figures themselves.

The SPD's historic defeat and heavy losses can also be traced in the migration model. The SPD still received just under 8,150,000 second votes, a loss of just over 3,750,000 votes. By far the largest recipient of SPD votes was the CDU (1,760,000). This is followed by the AfD (720,000) and first-time voters/deceased (630,000). However, substantial votes were also lost to Die Linke (560,000) and the BSW (440,000). The smallest losses were measured in relation to the Greens (100,000). The SPD, on the other hand, gained most from non-voters (250,000), followed by former FDP voters (120,000) and other parties (60,000).

The CDU and CSU received almost 14,160,000 second votes, an increase of almost 3 million. The gains resulted primarily from former voters of the 'traffic light' coalition: according to the migration model, the CDU received 1,760,000 votes from the SPD, 1,350,000 votes from the FDP, and an estimated 460,000 votes from the Greens. A substantial increase of 900,000 votes came from non-voters. Around 360,000 votes came from other parties.

Despite winning the election, the CDU suffered major vote losses: just over 1 million votes went to the AfD. Some 620,000 votes went to first-time voters/ deceased and a similar number to the SPD. What both parties have in common is that they are strongly supported by older voters, so it can be assumed for both parties that some of their loyal voters have died since the last election. The Union is estimated to have given the BSW, which was running for the first time, 220,000 votes, and Die Linke 70,000 votes.

The Greens lost slightly over 1 million second votes in the 2025 federal election, reaching just over 5,760,000 second votes. The largest loss of votes occurred in the direction of Die Linke (700,000). The CDU also lost 460,000 votes. Further outflows were recorded in the direction of the BSW (150,000), the AfD (100,000) and first-time voters/deceased (40,000). In terms of gains, the Greens were able to attract votes primarily from

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3   See: https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/bundestagswahl-2025-wie-die-linke-mit-einer-wut-rede-von-heidi-reichinnek-tiktok-eroberte-110306579.html
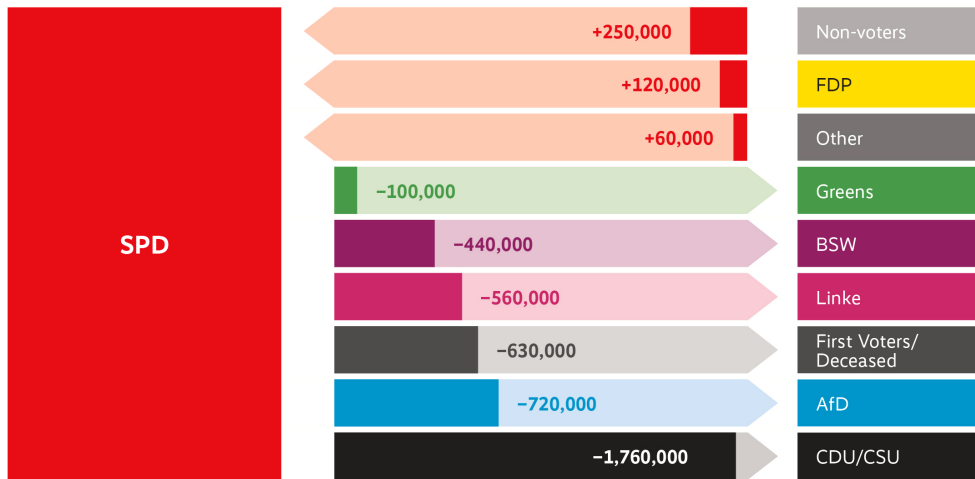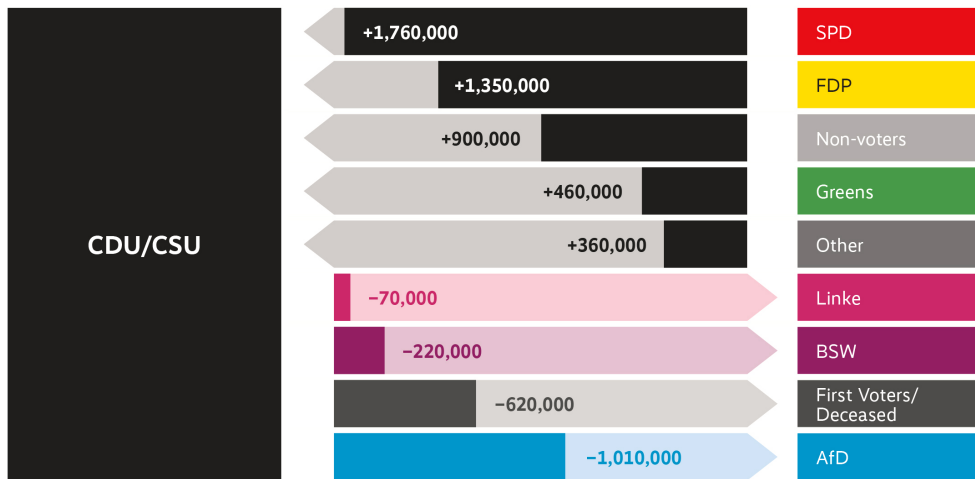
Figure 12: Voter migration SPD

	SPD	
+250,000		Non-voters
+120,000		FDP
+60,000		Other
−100,000		Greens
−440,000		BSW
−560,000		Linke
−630,000		First Voters/Deceased
−720,000		AfD
−1,760,000		CDU/CSU

Figure 13: Voter migration CDU/CSU

	CDU/CSU	
+1,760,000		SPD
+1,350,000		FDP
+900,000		Non-voters
+460,000		Greens
+360,000		Other
−70,000		Linke
−220,000		BSW
−620,000		First Voters/Deceased
−1,010,000		AfD

Figure 14: Voter migration Greens

	Greens	
+140,000		FDP
+110,000		Non-voters
+100,000		SPD
+20,000		Other
−700,000		Linke
−460,000		CDU/CSU
−150,000		BSW
−100,000		AfD
−40,000		First Voters/Deceased

Source: Infratest dimap exit poll
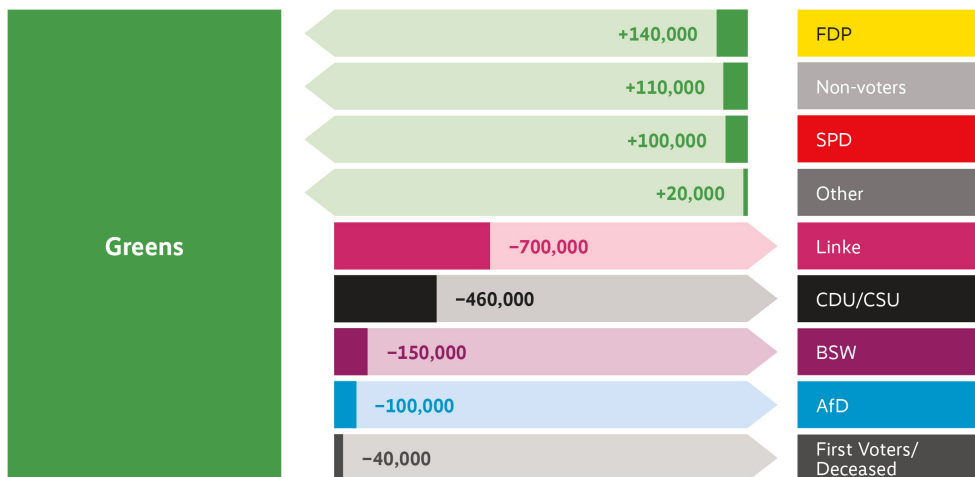
Figure 15: Voter migration AfD

+1,810,000	Non-voters
+1,010,000	CDU/CSU
+890,000	FDP
+790,000	Other
+720,000	SPD
+110,000	Linke
+100,000	Greens
+30,000	First Voters/Deceased
−60,000	BSW
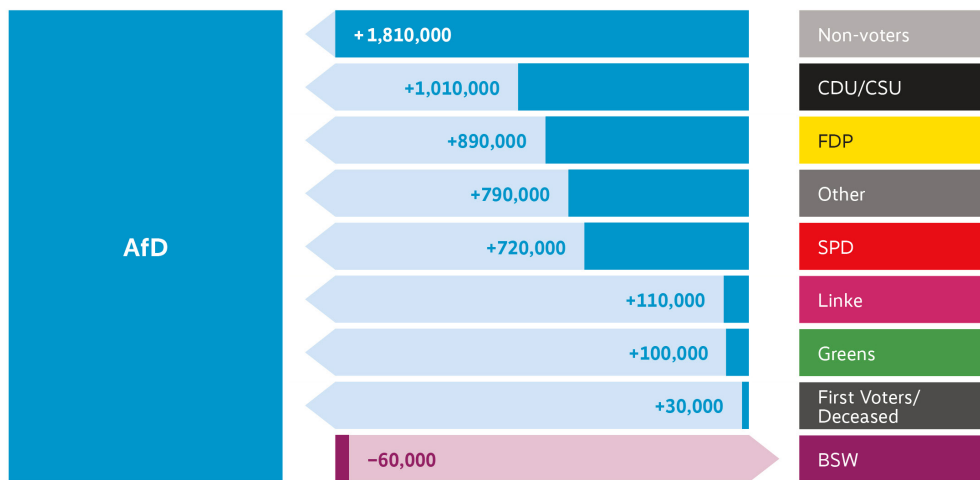
Figure 16: Voter migration BSW

+500,000	Other
+440,000	SPD
+400,000	Non-voters
+350,000	Linke
+260,000	FDP
+220,000	CDU/CSU
+150,000	Greens
+80,000	First Voters/Deceased
+60,000	AfD
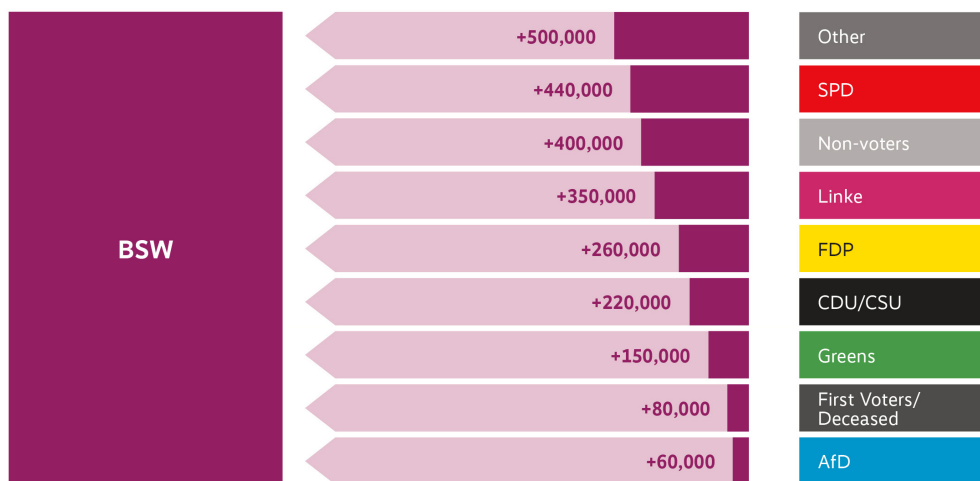
Figure 17: Voter migration Die Linke

+700,000	Greens
+560,000	SPD
+440,000	First Voters/Deceased
+310,000	Other
+290,000	Non-voters
+100,000	FDP
+70,000	CDU/CSU
−110,000	AfD
−350.000	BSW

Source: Infratest dimap exit poll
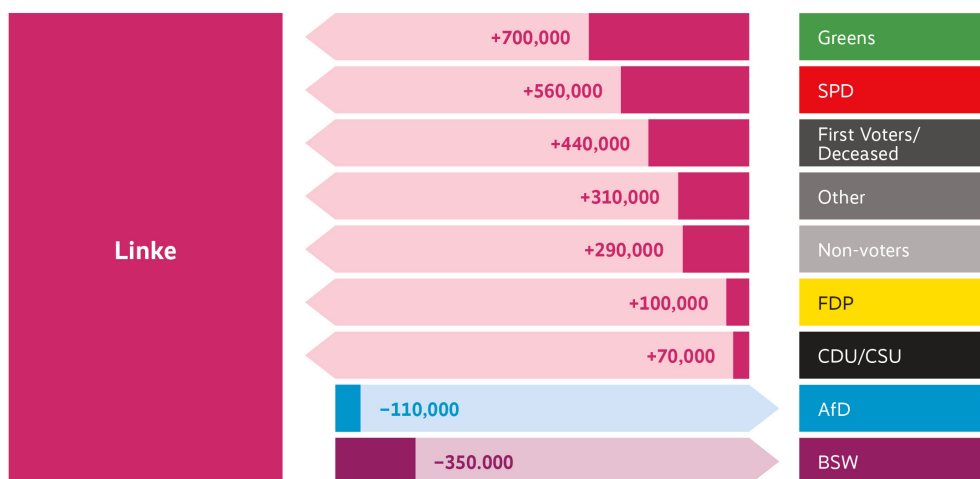
Figure 18: Voter migration FDP

FDP		
−40,000	Non-voters
−100,000	Linke
−120,000	Other
−120,000	SPD
−140,000	First Voters/Deceased
−140,000	Greens
−260,000	BSW
−890,000	AfD
−1,350,000	CDU/CSU
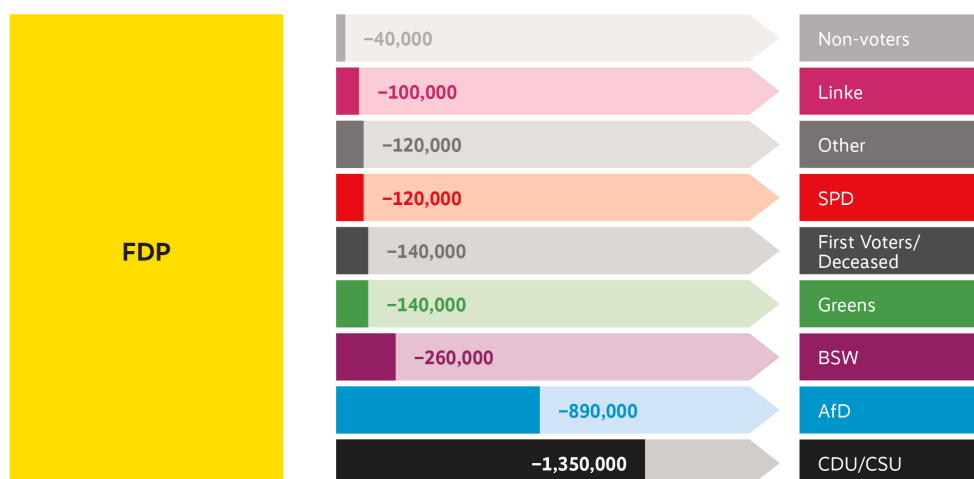
Figure 19: Voter migration Non-voters

Non-voters		
−40,000	FDP
−110,000	Greens
−160,000	Other
−250,000	SPD
−290,000	Linke
−400,000	BSW
−900,000	CDU/CSU
−1,810,000	AfD

Source: Infratest dimap exit poll
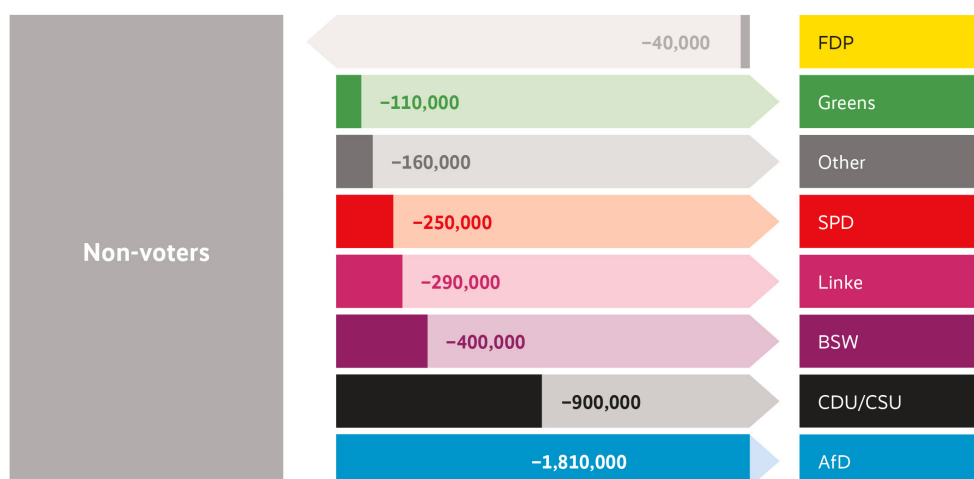
their former coalition partners. The largest increase came from the FDP (140,000). A gain of 100,000 votes from the SPD was measured, slightly less than the Green gain among non-voters (110,000). The smallest influx was measured from other parties (20,000).

The AfD doubled its number of second votes and obtained over 10 million votes for the first time. According to the migration model, they mobilised non-voters most strongly (1,810,000). But more than 1 million votes also switched from the CDU to the AfD. Further strong gains were found from the FDP (890,000), other parties (790,000) and the SPD (720,000). Small gains were seen from former supporters of Die Linke (110,000) and the Greens (100,000). A small increase (30,000) is also assumed among first-time voters/deceased. The BSW, which was running for the first time, was expected to lose 60,000 votes.

The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), which was competing in a federal election for the first time, achieved 2,468,670 second votes and remaining just under the 5 per cent threshold. The party achieved its largest gains among former voters of other parties (500,000), the SPD (440,000) and Die Linke (350,000). An estimated 400,000 votes came from the ranks of previous non-voters. About 10 per cent of the BSW electorate formerly voted for the FDP (260,000) and the CDU (220,000). Smaller gains were made from the Greens (150,000), first-time voters/deceased (80,000) and the AfD (60,000).

Die Linke almost doubled its vote in terms of second votes compared with 2021, obtaining more than 4,355,000. According to the migration model, it yielded 350,000 votes to its splinter party the BSW. It lost another 110,000 votes to the AfD. However, this was more than compensated with gains among former voters of other parties. The largest gains were recorded from the Greens (700,000), followed by the SPD (560,000), first-time voters/deceased (440,000), other parties (310,000) and non-voters (290,000). There were small in-flows from the FDP (100,000) and the CDU/CSU (70,000).
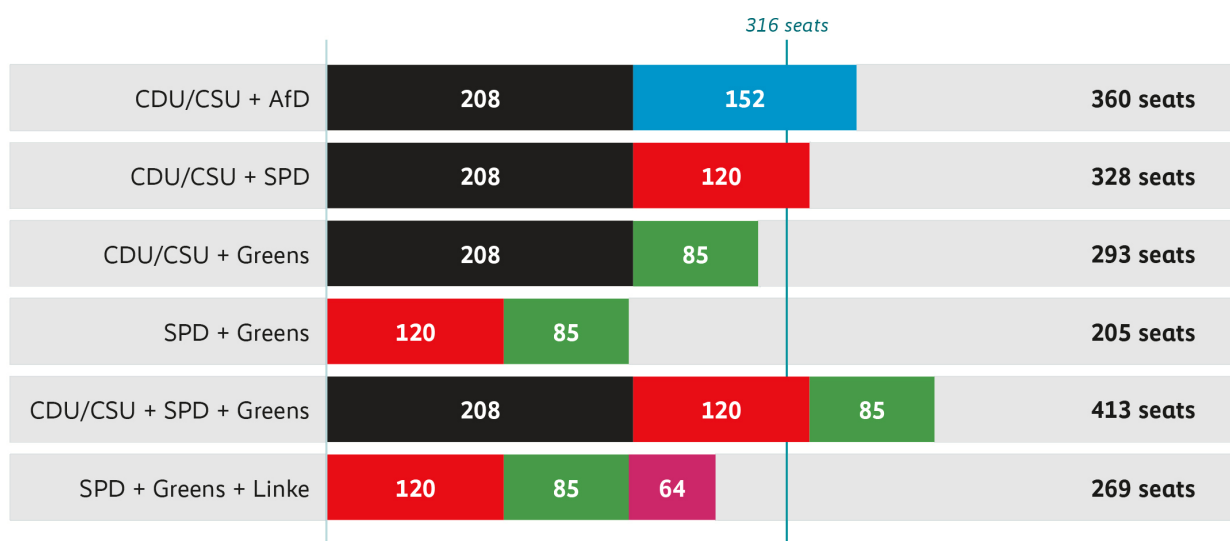
The FDP lost more than 3 million second votes and managed only just under 2,150,000 second votes. According to the migration model, it is the only party to lose votes to all parties and voter groups. The biggest beneficiary of this haemorrhage was the CDU with 1,350,000 votes, followed by the AfD with 890,000 votes. Two-thirds of the lost votes went to the right-wing party spectrum. In third place is the BSW with an estimated 260,000 votes from former FDP voters. By contrast, the other outflows to first-time voters/ the deceased, the Greens, other parties, the SPD and Die Linke appear quite small, lying between an extrapolated 140,000 and 100,000 votes. The FDP was the only party unable to benefit from the higher voter turnout and also lost ground to non-voters.

Who mobilised former non-voters?

The changes in the group of non-voters are particularly difficult to assess because only voters are surveyed in post-election polls. But because voter turnout has risen sharply, we can have at least a rough idea of those who stayed away from the election in 2021 but voted in 2025. In the 2025 federal election, the number of votes increased by over 3.2 million. By far the strongest mobilisation in this camp was achieved by the AfD (1,810,000). By comparison, the CDU managed to attract half as many votes from among non-voters (900,000). The BSW was able to attract 400,000 votes from former non-voters. They were followed by Die Linke (290,000), the SPD (250,000), other parties (160,000) and the Greens (110,000). According to the migration model, the FDP was the only party to lose votes to non-voters.

What do the results mean for government formation?

The new government will be a coalition between two parties. After the failure of the 'traffic light' coalition, the first three-way coalition at the federal level is seen as a failed experiment. With three parties fluctuating around the 5-per cent threshold, the election campaign was characterised by uncertainty as to whether this wish could come true. The election results now show that only five parties have managed to enter the Bundestag, which makes it possible, at least mathematically, to form a coalition between two parties. This means an alliance between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, but also with the AfD.

Figure 22: Evaluation of coalition models (led by the first-named party)

Coalition	Seats	316 seats
CDU/CSU + AfD	208 + 152	360 seats
CDU/CSU + SPD	208 + 120	328 seats
CDU/CSU + Greens	208 + 85	293 seats
SPD + Greens	120 + 85	205 seats
CDU/CSU + SPD + Greens	208 + 120 + 85	413 seats
SPD + Greens + Linke	120 + 85 + 64	269 seats

Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (Elections Research Group), Politbarometer February III 2025, KW 08.

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Acknowledgements

A shared destiny: why Merz and Starmer will come to depend on European cooperation over Trumpian disruption

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To be conservative, according to this most British of institutions, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is to favour preserving, or keeping intact, an existing structure or system: to be averse to fundamental change.

The likely next German Chancellor, leader of the German Christian Democratic Union Friedrich Merz, has a particularly conservative reputation. Distinctly to the political right of his long-time rival, former Chancellor Angela Merkel, he is also seen as a social conservative, be it in the area of family policy and bioethics, or in discussions about German *Leitkultur*, its supposed core national values.

And yet, in the space of just over a month, Merz has protagonised two of the most significant political *volte-faces* in the 80 years since the end of World War II. Immediately pre-election, he sponsored a bill to tighten immigration policy that breached the *firewall* – a formerly unassailable normative position in German politics to not work with, or propose any parliamentary motions that rely on the votes of, the extreme right. It did not stand him in good stead.

Immediately post-election, then, he went on to break with another, previously indisputable, tenet of the German political centre-right. Asserting, shortly after the polls closed, that the United States no longer "care much about the fate of Europe", he called for immediate action to strengthen Europe "so that we achieve independence from the US". A day later, he warned: "This is really five minutes to midnight for Europe."

These remarks found rather more approval, both domestically and Europe-wide. Yet they represent an unprecedented about-turn by one of the most explicitly Atlanticist German politicians of many years, a former chairman of the influential Atlantik-Brücke, which has advocated for close economic, financial, educational and military partnership between Western Europe and the US since the early 1950s.

"I never thought I would say this", Merz admitted. And not just because of personal convictions. Atlanticism has been in the DNA of German conservative politics since the early post-war days. The first Federal Chancellor, Christian Democrat Konrad Adenauer, recognised the US as 'ultimate arbiter' in his efforts to integrate the FRG as a newly sovereign and equal member in Western Europe and the Atlantic Alliance. Indeed, Western European Christian Democrats, strongly supported by close transatlantic networks, were the architects of European integration in the early days. In the face of Soviet threats, the US pushed for German rearmament; both advocated for the (ultimately doomed) European Defence Community. It is only in the context of a security environment that is changing radically and at blistering pace, then, that Merz' repositioning is even conceivable.

These stark geopolitical shifts give two new meanings to another most British concept: the "squeezed middle". Domestically, first, centrist parties feel ever more pressured by the return of a nativist politics that is developing on both fringes of the political spectrum, if meeting on far-right grounds. Beyond the US, German just as much as the French presidential and indeed the latest European parliament elections are a case in point. It is entirely in the UK's own interest to seek to counter the appeal of populist parties, which are so comfortable with promising easy answers to all difficult questions – at home and abroad. A scenario in which the AfD wins the next German elections, Le Pen becomes President of France, and Reform UK take over from the Conservatives, is a high-risk one for democratic Europe, the UK included.

Second, geopolitically, Europe is now increasingly hemmed in on (at least) two sides by globally dominant forces no longer favouring liberal democratic principles. The US, so invested once in European unity and capability to face off the Soviet Union, now identifies Europe as an ideological threat, while siding with Russia. J.D. Vance's comments at the Munich Security Conference clearly articulated this seismic shift in both normative and geopolitical terms.

It shows that for all political ideologies, history can come calling. Long-held assumptions and long-standing alliances can morph as the international environment does. Merz, Atlanticist *par excellence*, is now turning away from the US and toward a new European security architecture – the 'strategic autonomy' long touted by French President Macron. Words might even be followed by – relatively – swift action, considering the usually slow pace of German politics. It is the one policy area in which Merz' likely coalition partners, the SPD, is most aligned; former defence minister Boris Pistorius (SPD), Germany's most popular politician, could return to his role.

This will have an impact on European collaboration, not least in the security and defence space. In addition to a likely revived Franco-German relationship, and even though not much love is lost between Merz and

the European Commission president, his party-political colleague and long-time Merkel ally Ursula von der Leyen, their position on the EU's ability to pursue its strategic interests globally may well align more closely now.

It will therefore be important for the UK to monitor the extent to which former MEP Merz is willing or able to take a more prominent leadership role in Europe than his predecessor – either way, the UK will feel the impact. But, with the very existence of NATO now being called into doubt, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer will face difficult strategic choices about how he sees European-wide multilateral collaboration, including and particularly in security and defence matters, develop.

So far, he has been able to win over governments on both sides of the Atlantic.

Last October, the UK and Germany signed a landmark defence and security agreement. In early February 2025, Starmer discussed defence with EU heads of government over dinner in Brussels, the first British PM to do so since the UK left the bloc. And even more recently, this past weekend, European leaders made the return journey to discuss defence in London, ahead of a special European Council Meeting on the subject. It was a dramatic show of force in support of Ukraine, after President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's disastrous meeting in the White House. Yet Starmer is unlikely ever to deploy such stark words as Merz. Indeed, the diplomatic overtures on display at his first visit to the White House, and his liaison since, currently speak a diametrically opposed language – offers of a second state visit included.

The question will be to what extent this literally pivotal role will be open to Starmer as a strategic option in the long term, and not only due to the demonstrated fickleness of Trump's trade and foreign policy preferences. If this is indeed now the beginning of a *Zeitenwende*, in which the liberal post-war order is being called into question, the government will have to confront increasingly fundamental political and normative choices. One conservative tenet however is likely to guide political leaders on both sides of the Channel – the ambition to preserve or keep intact Europe, and its constitutional democracies.

The last wake-up call

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The outcome of the elections in Germany may seem to be a wake-up call for progressives in Europe, but upon taking a closer look it becomes clear that the alarm clock was set in 2021, and has been put on snooze ever since.

The decline of the SPD's voter basis has been obvious since its engagement as a partner in the grand coalitions of Angela Merkel. Voters had lamented at the time that it was not clear to them where to find the main programmatic differences between the two German "*Volksparteien*" of CDU and SPD. As for Angela Merkel, some critics in her own party were wondering whether she might not identify better as a social democrat. The SPD had lost its profile in a coalition where Merkel could claim positive outcomes such as the minimum wage as her success even though it was introduced by the smaller coalition partner in the government.

The decline was also determined by demographic changes and social changes in Germany. Years of austerity and the damaging effects of the pandemic had left large swathes of the German public in despair when the incumbent Merkel stopped campaigning for office in 2021 and Olaf Scholz presented himself as a kind of a male version of the German "*Mutti*". The SPD's campaign in 2021 was not a real clearing kick, but more of a reassurance that the Germans would get what they longed for the most: stability.

Following the 2021 federal elections, the SPD emerged as the largest party in the Bundestag, with 25.7%, but did not have enough seats either to govern outright or together with the third place Greens on 14.7%. With the SPD and the CDU ruling out a grand coalition with each other, a traffic light coalition was viewed as the most likely outcome by many in the media. At the beginning of the coalition, the German public and media were optimistic about this historical experiment. The coalition agreement was full of compromises, but was this not exactly what the German political system was known for: to be capable of finding a common ground? To be able to moderate political differences towards a positive outcome? The document contained a number of progressive proposals attractive to the SPD's base, including, for instance, the construction of 400,000 new apartments, citizenship reform, welfare reform, and a package of measures focused on accelerating long overdue digitalization. There are quite a few political observers in Germany who claimed at the time that the "traffic light" coalition was

well on the way to establishing public confidence in its management capacities. Many saw the country as being on the right track just until 24 February 2022: the start of Russia's destructive war of aggression against Ukraine.

Inflation, a cost of living crisis, rising energy prices and general insecurity were the result. And although the government managed, with great effort, to decouple the entire country's energy supply from Russia, this was not credited to the government's account. Unlike in the UK, it was not possible to create a kind of national consensus as to which side of history Germany should be on and what price it was prepared to pay for this choice. Unlike in the UK, the voices were more diverse when it came to the necessary consequences. When a state loan worth 60 billion euros was confirmed as unconstitutional, the traffic light government was finally rendered unable to act. The so-called "climate and transformation fund", a core area of the coalition agreement, was dead. This also meant that the modernization project for Germany was dead. From the voters' point of view, just another government had failed to fulfil its promises. It is pointless to argue about the complex reasons for the failure. To put it in the words of Olaf Scholz: 'I didn't invade Ukraine'.

Instead, it can be said that inequality has been rising in Germany for almost 20 years and that young people today are no better off than their parents were at the same age. Since the financial and economic crisis in 2008, the Euro crisis, austerity, the Covid pandemic and the recent cost of living crisis, another concern has been added to the fears of economic and social decline: the fear of war. It can make a difference if you live on an island or if you can get into a car in Berlin and drive down to Lviv in less than a day.

A majority of the German population remains dissatisfied. Regional differences have become even more pronounced, and the gap between East and West has widened further. And there are still major differences in satisfaction with democracy depending on the social situation. People who are economically worse off are significantly less satisfied. This clearly shows that satisfaction with democracy also depends to a large extent on fair political outcomes. A fair distribution policy is also a good democratic policy. An unfair policy gives a boost for the rise of the extremists.

Another worrying finding of recent studies by FES is that conspiracy narratives are catching on, at least in parts of the German population. They find a relatively high level of approval, especially in the right-wing political spectrum, which almost always correlates with a negative assessment of democracy. Democracy in Germany is robust, but it currently has to prove itself in extraordinary times of crisis. It seems as if the voters have set the alarm clock to snooze once again. However, there will be another awakening in 2029 at the latest.

The increase in the vote for the AfD could also be seen as a sign that the German public is -- rightly? -- impatient and wants radicalism. The remaining 80% of voters who decided for democratic parties, however, would like to see change, but not ruthlessness, progress, but not chaos. The whole debate about migration was in a way just a proxy issue. As if through a magnifying glass, it only highlighted the fact that the provision of public services (*Daseinsvorsorge*) in Germany has reached its limits. Not a single deportation flight of a refugee would automatically provide more housing, better public transport or refurbished schools. It is reported that the AfD had very high approval ratings where the fewest refugees live, and not the other way around.

If they are to succeed in the future, progressive forces need to see this stock-taking as an urgent matter to use the very short time remaining until the next elections to urgently tackle the current problems and to explain this clearly and credibly to the people in their communications. The good news for the SPD is that social democracy in Germany can distinguish itself more strongly from the conservative profile of the CDU than it could in the Merkel years, and that the Labour Party in the UK has majority in parliament that puts it into the driver's seat.

Political problems nowadays are perceived as (too) complex, while at the same time there appears to be a longing for simple and supposedly objective, neutral answers. We live in an age of paradox. There is growing support for direct democracy and expert government. For representative democracy, this means that it needs to make better use of its strengths - a fair balance of interests and the organisation of social cohesion - and open up new ways of participation. Why, for example, do candidates in Germany only face so-called "citizens' arenas" during times of election campaigns and not on a regular basis? Although the schedule of a prime minister or Bundeskanzler leaves no time for a grassroots mood test, why not organise regular community meetings with the head of government in marginalized areas by drawing lots? Local party branches should be cultivating and promoting local leaders who can go on to become credible, effective and genuinely representative parliamentarians for their community. If politicians can credibly show that they really "care" they can prove that they are working in the interest of their voters.

There must be a reason why Olaf Scholz won his constituency in Potsdam against the national trend.

A lot of recommendations have been already discussed that could help bridge the credibility gap. This includes **rooting the sustainability agenda in everyday concerns, supporting investment in public transport and mobility** (*Deutschlandticket*)**, working on energy bill reductions** (with fair mechanism to help workers with the upfront costs of energy, improvements in homes) or boosting **job creation through green transformation** and **leveraging private investment with state funds.**

When it comes to the questions of social justice and solidarity, however, though there still seems to be a credibility gap. Even though progressives continue to emphasise that the transition to a sustainable economy must be fair and just, it has been working-class people who had to bear the brunt of the costs, and there were no long-term reliable financial safeguards in place to ensure that lower-income families benefit from sustainability policies. **Progressive taxation** on wealthier individuals or large corporations to finance green policies that benefit the entire population still need to be implemented. Other **universal basic services** like healthcare, education, and public housing, can no longer be taken for granted. And for progressive parties to prosper, working people must feel that progressive parties policies address their fundamental needs, not only climate goals.

Furthermore, top-down national policies may feel disconnected from local realities. It appears that progressives still do not focus on community-level solutions. Future success might depend on empowering local governments and communities to develop sustainable initiatives suited to their needs, whether it's creating green jobs, investing in local renewable energy, or improving local infrastructure, but instead we leave our communities penniless. Do progressive really mean it when they say they would like to engage communities directly in planning and decision-making? Do we want people to feel that their voices are heard in the transition to a greener economy or do we fear the Nimbys?

Despite all the recent studies of the last elections in Germany (Report "*Aus Fehlern lernen*") and the UK a **clear, transparent messaging** is still missing. Instead we complain about the success of right-wing parties in social media networks. To rediscover their success, social democratic parties need to be more transparent about the challenges and trade-offs involved in growth and particularly in sustainable growth. For a very long time for instance, we used to explain that there may be short-term costs, but that these will be offset by long-term economic benefits such as job creation, health improvements, and energy security. The daily lives of people in the last five years though has proven the opposite to them. Did we change our communication accordingly? The SPD can conclude

that its **campaigning was not inclusive**. It must engage with working-class communities and show a genuine understanding of their challenges. To listen to their concerns is not enough we need to co-create policies with them, rather than merely selling policies from the top down.

Workers in high-pollution industries (e.g., coal, gas, automotive) need concrete **transition plans** that provide **immediate** education, retraining, and relocation opportunities. In seeking to revive, the SPD should clearly articulate these plans, and explain how they will support workers through the green transition, including wage subsidies or a direct retraining fund. While the SPD was advocating for raising minimum wages and ensuring fair wages across sectors, economic fairness still did not pay out in the face of a cost of living crisis. The German government had been teaching that investment in green technologies can lead to a new wave of innovation and global competitiveness. We have been preaching that promoting **clean tech**, **renewable energy innovations**, and **sustainable agriculture** can position our countries as leaders in the global green economy but on the ground, we **seemed to have lost our** connections with labour unions and other worker-based organizations who e.g. in Wolfsburg - a centre of German automotive industry - stopped voting for the SPD. By credibly aligning sustainability with workers' rights, fair pay, and decent working conditions, we should demonstrate that we are not just a bunch of climate activists but also change-agents of social justice.

Even though everyone is **are aware of the importance of a focus on youth and future generations** the SPD did not manage to create a narrative of intergenerational solidarity—acknowledging that the climate crisis will affect future generations more severely and that immediate action is needed to protect them. The German Youth decided to vote for extremist parties on both sides of the spectrum instead.

Voters become disillusioned when promises feel vague or unachievable. We as progressives can only be successful if we manage to set clear, **realistic goals** for carbon reduction, job creation, and economic growth, with **feasible timelines** and **concrete steps**. Instead of pledges in four to five-year election circles we need to commit to **regular progress reports**: Once in power, Labour and SPD should release regular, detailed reports about the progress made on green initiatives and the implementation of economic policies. This shows that our parties are **accountable** and dedicated to following through on its promises. This needs to be done with the same effort as during a campaign. Our leaders, prime ministers, secretary of states and party VIPs must be prepared to go into the lowlands of rural communities and outlying towns, be it Blackpool or Gelsenkirchen.

Let us also make the link between environmental sustainability and public health more explicit. Air pollution, waste management, and chemicals in food and water affect the working class disproportionately. Reducing pollution and promoting healthier environments can improve public health and reduce healthcare costs, which directly benefits working people. There are not many fields in politics where the narrative of intergenerational solidarity is more obvious than here. We don't want to be complacent and we don't want to be sleepwalking into the disaster of the failing of our democracies. Everyone concerned about the future needs to get up, and turn off that snooze button.

Comeback on the left. *Die Linke* in the 2025 German election

Dr Roland Kappe, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University College London

Introduction

The 2025 German election has been widely recognised as a victory for the political right. After a campaign focused on immigration issues, Friedrich Merz, the leader of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) looks set to become the next Chancellor, and for the first time in the history of the federal republic, a far-right party, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) obtained more than 20 per cent of the votes.

On the other end of the political spectrum however, the final weeks of the campaign saw a dramatic and perhaps unlikely comeback. At the beginning of the campaign, the Left Party (*Die Linke*) appeared to be in terminal decline, polling at three per cent; below the important five-percent-threshold for parliamentary representation. But, as the German saying goes: *Totgesagte leben länger*, 'those presumed dead live longer', and *Die Linke* won nearly nine per cent of the vote on election day. But what factors contributed to this last-minute revival? What explains this unexpected turnaround and crucially, why did so many young voters rally behind a party that, until recently, seemed on the brink of collapse?

Perhaps surprisingly in an election framed as a win for the right, the dynamics of the campaign allowed *Die Linke* to seize the moment by articulating a clear and distinctive progressive position in the debates on migration that dominated the news cycle. The party was only able to take this position after the breakaway of the more immigration-sceptical Sahra Wagenknecht and her followers, and the subsequent change and rejuvenation of the party's membership base. Helped by a successful social media campaign and a focus on linking social justice and practical issues relevant to younger voters, such as high rents, the party was able to stage a last-minute comeback, finishing as the largest party among young voters.

Die Linke in Crisis

The successor to the GDR's ruling communist party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED), the party, then under the name *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS), always had its strongest support in eastern Germany after reunification, providing both representation and an outlet for the frustrations of East Germans after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. In the early 2000s, the party briefly gained new momentum by merging with disaffected Social Democrats from western Germany. However, the emergence of the AfD as a dominant force in eastern Germany led to a steady decline in the party's electoral fortunes. Once a stronghold for the party, the eastern states began shifting to the far right.

The crisis deepened when Sahra Wagenknecht, a former parliamentary co-leader of the party and one of its most visible and polarising figures, split away to found her own party - and name it after herself for good measure. The *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW) or 'Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance' maintained the same left-wing economic ideology but combined it with a more socially conservative and anti-immigration stance. The BSW attracted a considerable segment of the Left Party's former base and filled a long unoccupied space in the German party-political landscape, as shown by the European Parliament elections in mid-2024, where the BSW outperformed *Die Linke*.

The autumn 2024 state elections in Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Saxony were disastrous for *Die Linke*. The party suffered heavy losses in what had once been its eastern heartlands. In Thuringia, *Die Linke* went from the largest party, with 31% of the vote in 2019, to fourth place, with 13% of the vote in 2024, ending the government of Bodo Ramelow, the party's only state-premier. With the East swinging toward the AfD and the emergence of BSW splitting the far-left vote, *Die Linke* found itself hovering at 3 percent in national polling, below the 5-percent-threshold for parliamentary representation.

Faced with the prospect of electoral extinction, *Die Linke* launched *Operation Silberlocke* ('Operation Silverlocks') – a last-ditch effort to secure parliamentary representation by winning at least three directly elected seats in the *Bundestag*, a backdoor route into parliament if a party fails to reach the 5-percent-threshold. The campaign centred on three

veteran – and silver-haired – politicians, Gregor Gysi, Dietmar Bartsch, and Bodo Ramelow, who leveraged their experience and name recognition to rally voters in key constituencies.

By election day, the party managed to reverse its electoral fortune, capitalising on the dynamics of a campaign that shifted sharply from the failures of the incumbent 'traffic light coalition' to a focus on economic policy to issues of migration and the question of how to engage with the far-right AfD. On the evening of Sunday, 23 February, *Die Linke* celebrated winning nearly nine per cent of the vote and being the most popular party among under-25s.

Seizing the Opportunity

Following several high-profile attacks with few commonalities, except for having been perpetrated by people with a migrant background, migration dominated the campaign. Alongside the AfD, the CDU/CSU were calling for tougher measures on illegal immigration, more deportations of rejected asylum seekers, and refusal of entry to some asylum seekers. W rejecting the CDU proposals, the governing SPD and Greens appeared to match the tough rhetoric on deportations and internal security.

The migration debates culminated in the CDU leader Friedrich Merz's decision to collaborate with the AfD on an - ultimately unenacted - asylum policy vote on 29 January. Securing a majority with the support of the far-right was seen as a crack in the so called *Brandmauer* (firewall), that is, a norm for the democratic, mainstream parties not to cooperate or seek majorities with the far-right.

The vote with the AfD sparked heated debates in parliament and mass protests in many German cities, providing *Die Linke* with an opportunity. Heidi Reichinnek, the party's young *Spitzenkandidaten* delivered an angry speech condemning Merz in the *Bundestag* – a speech that went viral, amassing millions of views on TikTok. It reinforced the party's image as a strong, anti-fascist force, drawing in both voters alarmed by the violation of the *Brandmauer* and those disagreeing with the rightward shift on immigration of all other parties. Following the asylum votes in parliament and wide-spread protests, *Die Linke*'s popularity surged. Figure 1 shows vote intention polls for all major parties from the start of the campaign to election day, highlighting *Die Linke*.

Die Linke's surge in popularity was especially pronounced among younger voters, with 25 percent of 18 to 24-year olds voting for the party, an increase of 17 percentage points from the last federal election among this group, as can be seen in Figure 2.

While this shift appears to have been driven in part by the strong social media campaign, the tendency of younger votersto choose new parties, unencumbered by the years or decades of voting and party attachments is what enabled this shift. Beyond authentic social media appeal, the party's focus on social justice resonated with young people, particularly those most concerned with inequality, insecure housing, rising rents and energy costs. First-time voters and young women were especially drawn to the left party.

Younger women in particular are often more socially progressive, more likely to vote for parties that emphasise and support social service provision and redistribution, and more attentive to anti-prejudice norms, while men, especially from younger cohorts, are more susceptible to national identity and anti-immigration appeals. In previous elections, this 'new gender gap' has motivated strong support for the Greens which in this election shifted to *Die Linke*. The exit poll data show a large gender gap especially among young voters. The AfD is the most popular party among young men, while *Die Linke* is now by far the largest party among young women.

What enabled *Die Linke* to seize the moment?

Three factors allowed *Die Linke* to capitalise on the opportunities presented during the campaign.

Firstly, **clarity**, providing a noticeable counter-position to the dominant narrative on immigration.

Secondly, **renewal**, a rise in new members led to a rejuvenated and less fractious party after the departure of Sahra Wagenknecht.

And thirdly, **mobilisation**, both by means of a successful social media campaign, but also in terms of a practical focus on issues relevant to younger voters: social justice, inequality, high rents and the cost of living.

A clear position on migration

In the latter weeks of the campaign, *Die Linke* stood out as the only clear pro-migration voice in the *Bundestag*. Other parties, first and foremost the centre-right CDU/CSU, but also the SPD, appeared to compete by ever stronger rhetoric and proposals for more restrictive policies on internal security, migration and asylum. While the SPD chancellor Olaf Scholz's arguments centred on increasing deportations and internal security measures, the CDU leader Friedrich Merz demanded the rejection of some asylum seekers

Figure 1: Vote intention polls during the campaign and election results for all major parties

28.5% CDU/CSU
20.8% AfD
16.4% SPD
11.6% Greens
8.8% Die Linke
4.97% BSW
4.33% FDP
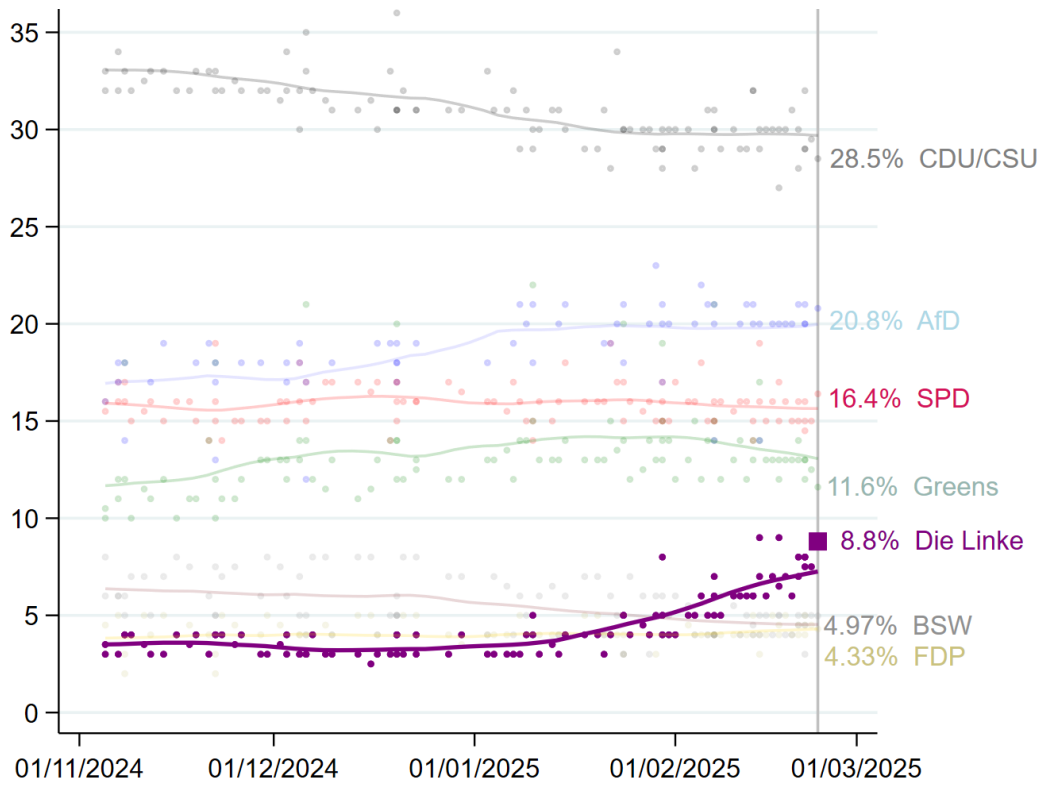
Source: author's estimation and plot, data from wahlrecht.de

Figure 2: Party vote shares among 18-24-year olds in the 2025 Bundestag election.

Party	Share	Change
Linke	25	+17
AfD	21	+14
Union	13	+3
SPD	12	-3
Grüne	10	-13
BSW	6	
FDP	5	-16
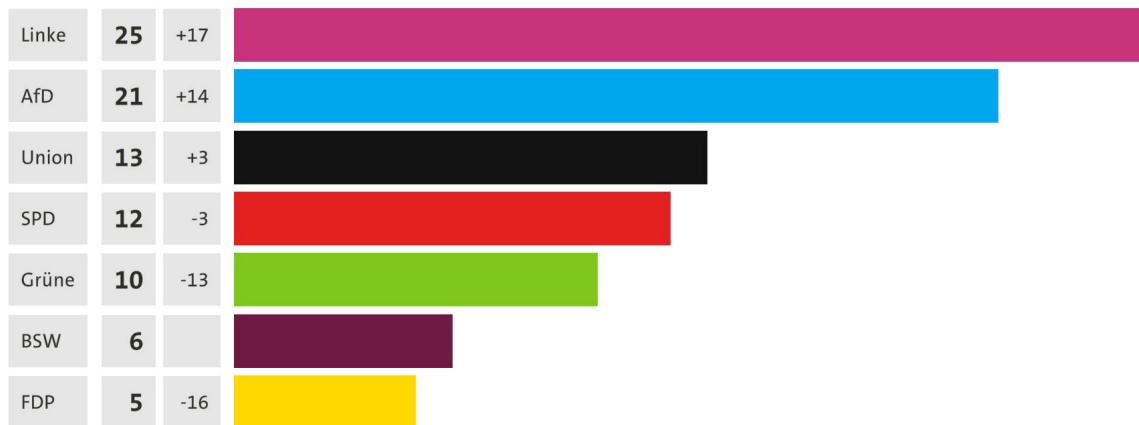
Source: tagesschau.de figure based on infratest dimap exit poll

at the border. Even Robert Habeck, the candidate for chancellor of the Greens, a party traditionally most associated with an open, progressive, and multicultural society, promised to take decisive action, by launching a ten-point plan for better internal security. In front of this backdrop, *Die Linke*'s opposition to the dominant narrative resonated with progressive, urban voters who did not see migration as the dominant political problem, and who were left frustrated by the apparent rightward shift of the political mainstream, and by what may be seen as concessions by the Greens and the SPD to a growing anti-immigration sentiment.

The clear positioning on the left end of the migration policy dimension is apparent in the estimates of party positions on political issues provided by the Open Expert Survey. Figure 3 shows the positions of the parties on a general migration policy dimension intended to capture whether parties favour a more open versus a more restrictive immigration policy, with *Die Linke* noticeably to the left of all other parties, including the Greens.

Rejuvenation after breakup

Ironically, what enabled *Die Linke* to take such a clear stance in the migration debates was the departure of Sahra Wagenknecht and her followers. Whist the breakaway of the BSW had looked like it might be the party's undoing, Wagenknecht had frequently clashed with her party over issues such as the war in Ukraine and migration. The party's positions on these issues often appeared contested and unclear, and voters despise intra-party conflict.

The irreconcilability of the immigration position of *Die Linke* and Wagenknecht becomes apparent when looking at Figure 3 above. While *Die Linke* finds itself at the far-left end on the issue, Wagenknecht and her BSW positioned themselves further to the right than the conservative CDU. On immigration, they are now closer to the AfD than to her old party; an attempt to appeal to older, economically left-wing, but socially conservative and broadly anti-immigrant voters, predominantly in the East – but anathema to *Die LInke's* new, young, and cosmopolitan electorates in the West.

The departure of Wagenknecht and the loss of these traditional supporters was mostly seen as a moment of mortal danger for the party, but it also had four cathartic effects that in hindsight proved essential to their comeback in this election.

Firstly, it allowed Die Linke to adopt a clear pro-immigration position. This would not have been possible with Wagenknecht and her supporters inside the party, or while trying to hold on to those predominantly eastern voters who now support the BSW or the AfD.

Secondly, the departure of Wagenknecht forced the party to regroup and rethink in terms of leadership. Losing one of their most prominent but also controversial and conflict-prone figures, and with her a number of her allies within the party, allowed for a period of renewal and change in leadership. The new leaders Jan van Aken, Ines Schwerdtner, and Heidi Reichinnek all lacked the prominence of Wagenknecht, but also brought a more modest and self-effacing style of politics to a party previously characterised by constant infighting. As one *Die Linke* politician put it in the days before the election: "Sahra left and took all the toxic people with her."

Thirdly unburdened from internal conflict on migration and questions about Wagenknecht's pro-Putin stance, *Die Linke* was able to focus its campaign on its core issues of inequality, redistribution, social justice and everyday economic struggles, prioritising topics like high rents and rising food and energy prices. *Die Linke* also offered practical support, including online tools to check for 'rent exploitation'. This clear, people-focused agenda resonated, especially among voters experiencing the issues first hand – and might explain why *Die Linke* already appeared to be increasing their vote share in polls before the 29 January *Brandmauer* vote.

Finally, the focus on core issues and the internal renewal afforded by the departure of Sahra Wagenknecht, led to a change in perception of *Die Linke* among younger left-wing voters. *Die Linke* attracted a wave of new, younger members, especially in urban areas. Its focus on economic justice - rents, wages, and inequality - resonated with left-wing types disappointed by the SPD and Greens in the governing coalition. In the election, 73% of *Die Linke's* new voters came from either the Greens (40%) or the SPD (33%). *Die Linke* also saw a substantial replacement and change of its membership base over the last year, and between the start of the year and election day, another 23,000 new members joined *Die Linke*, many of them young voters.

Mobilisation

During the short campaign following the collapse of the traffic light coalition, *Die Linke* successfully mobilised potential voters through an extensive traditional campaign operation, and a substantial online operation. Opportunity presented itself here, as the party transformed what was originally intended as a large-scale, door-to-door grassroots listening survey into an intensive canvassing operation, reaching over 600,000 households. By focusing on urgent economic issues like rent exploitation and heating costs, they directly engaged voters and provided practical assistance through online apps. Meanwhile, Heidi Reichinnek's social media campaign exploded in popularity, making *Die Linke* relatable to young

Figure 3: Party positions on immigration.
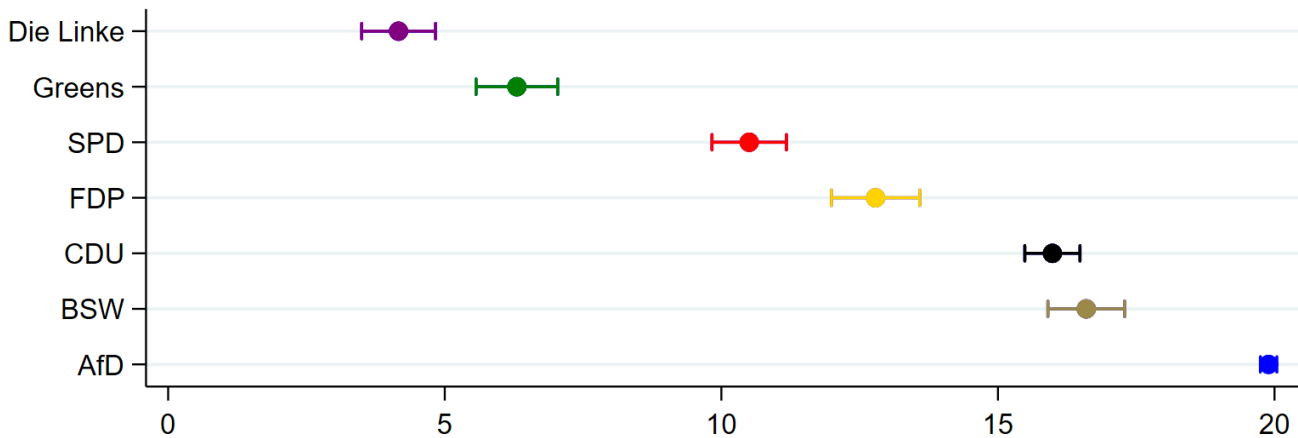
Data Source: Open Expert Survey 2025

voters through viral videos, memes, and influencer support. The online campaign even eclipsed the far-right's digital presence, as can be seen in the real time social media monitoring data on views and likes of online posts collected by the SPARTA project at the University of the German Armed Forces in Munich.

After Friedrich Merz's asylum policy vote with the AfD on 29 January, and heated debates in parliament, Germany saw a wave of protests against the normalisation of far-right politics. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets across major cities like Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich, as well as in many smaller towns. The rally in Berlin on 2 February drew 160,000 protesters. Led by civil society groups such as "Omas gegen Rechts" (Grannies against the Right), labour unions, and left-wing parties, protesters denounced the CDU's actions as legitimising the AfD and their policies. As previously mentioned, Heidi Reichinnek's viral speech against Merz TikTok and became a rallying cry. In it, she called people "to the barricades"; many followed, and more to the ballot box.
Who was most responsive to be mobilised by the protests? Young voters' weaker party attachments

make them more open to protest-driven mobilisation, as they are less bound by traditional loyalties and more responsive to issue-based politics. *Die Linke*'s clear antifascist and pro-immigration stance, amplified by mass protests, likely resonated with younger voters seeking an alternative to mainstream parties' rightward shift.

What happens next?

It's fair to say that *Die Linke* will be comfortable in its role as a left-wing opposition. Facing a CDU-led government, led by a chancellor Merz who went into the campaign with an unequivocal pro-business stance and cuts to the social welfare system on the agenda, Die Linke's core issues of inequality and social justice will remain relevant. However, the influx of younger and potentially more volatile voters that helped rejuvenate and energise the party, also brings risks. The Greens will go through a process of recovery in opposition and – having learned they cannot take young voters for granted – will work hard to win them back. Competing with the Greens for the attention of the same segment of voters will be much harder when the Greens are no longer lost in the responsibilities of office and part of

an unpopular government. Most importantly, climate change will no doubt be back on the political agenda in the future.

Following the asylum votes, the SPD, and perhaps also the Greens, had hoped to capitalise on the '*Brandmauer* moment' when Merz violated the cordon sanitaire by voting with the AfD. Some of the rhetoric in parliament was not much different from the Reichinnek speech. But focusing on the democratic norm violation while at the same time shifting towards the right on the policy issue in question and seemingly competing over who would be more effective at deporting illegal immigrants, was a difficult argument to make. Furthermore, both the SPD and the Greens were unable to shake the unpopularity of the incumbent government and chancellor.

Some of the lessons from the relative success of *Die Linke* however are a reminder of bread-and-butter politics. The party was able to compete by focusing on its core issue competencies. Social justice, inequality, and rising rents and costs are directly important to many people, and especially younger voters, but were often drowned out by the noise surrounding the migration topic. The party mounted a substantial, traditional canvassing operation, and had some - perhaps serendipitous - success on social media. Finally, after the departure of Wagenknecht, a unified party was able to articulate clear policy positions.

From the perspective of the centre-left, *Die Linke's* rejuvenation following the BSW's breakaway might also hold a hitherto unlikely prospect on the federal level: a potential coalition partner. While several SPD-Linke coalition governments exist at the state level, the party's foreign policy positions, especially on the war in Ukraine have precluded this to be a serious consideration. The short campaign has allowed *Die Linke* to bracket and avoid these topics to some extent. That won't be possible forever. The party will have to decide what it stands for, and internal conflicts on these issues seem likely. But, perhaps the departure of the pro-Putin wing of the party and the renewal and change of its membership will allow for some moderation of its foreign and defence policy. If so, a red-red-green (SPD-*Die Linke*-Greens) coalition might become a possibility in the future, even if a left-of-centre majority looks unlikely right now. In any case, *Die Linke's* relative success in 2025 suggests a new ability to compete with the SPD and Greens for voters who see the centre-left as not sufficiently credible on either inequality or pro-immigration standpoints.

A new world order: what the end of the unipolar Moment Means for Germany and Europe

Marc Saxer is the Director of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Bangkok for Regional Cooperation in Asia.

The Trump administration is "largely indifferent" to Europe's fate, election winner Friedrich Merz remarked on the evening of the election. For him, the absolute priority now is "to strengthen Europe step by step so that we achieve independence from the USA."

But what leads Friedrich Merz, a committed Atlanticist and long-time chairman of the Atlantik-Brücke, to make such a drastic shift in transatlantic relations?

Europeans, especially the Germans, are in shock. In Brussels, the defence secretary of the newly elected Trump administration, Pete Hegseth, made it unmistakably clear that Europeans will now have to bear the main burden of securing their continent and stabilizing their neighbourhood. In Munich, Vice President J.D. Vance issued an ultimatum to the Europeans: the United States is shifting its perspective to Asia and is upgrading its operating system accordingly. Instead of a sluggish, analogue bureaucracy, a highly efficient, AI-driven system administration is to provide the infrastructure for a new kind of tech feudalism—largely beyond the control of the democratic sovereign. If Europeans refuse to transform their governance systems, Vance warned, the value of the transatlantic partnership will disappear—along with America's security guarantee. Europe, it is implied, would be left defenceless against a revanchist Russia.

Germany is now paying the price for being dominated by two idealistic schools of thought that, based on historical parallels or moral beliefs, draw opposite conclusions.

For doves, the principle of "never again war" means that peace in Europe must be restored through a compromise with Russia. For hawks, the principle of "never again Holocaust" means that there can be no appeasement when it comes to defending European freedom.

These positions reflect contradictory assessments of Russia's strength: on the one hand, Russia is seen as too weak to prevail against Ukraine; on the other, it is considered powerful enough to overrun all of Europe.

As the new German government takes shape, Europeans urgently need instead to start thinking in terms of power balances. The future international order will emerge from the balance of power among great powers. At the same time, it remains unclear which faction within the Trump coalition will prevail in the internal struggle to redefine the American empire —and whether the transatlantic partnership has any future at all.

It is more useful in this *Zeitenwende* to think in scenarios—and to weigh their likelihood based on power balances.

With near certainty, the Pax Americana as we have known it is over. The Russian attack on Ukraine and the wars in the Middle East show that revisionist forces no longer believe the world's policeman has the strength or the will to defend the status quo. In Asia, a showdown between the two nuclear superpowers is looming. On the peripheries—from the Sahel region through Central Africa to the Caucasus—old conflicts are reigniting now that the Pax Americana has ended. Our interregnum is an era of uncertainty and instability.

The liberal world order, with its core promise of universally spreading democracy and human rights, appears also to be collapsing before our eyes. After years of democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarian powers, even the liberal hegemon has now declared the very order it created and upheld to be obsolete.

With the (re)emergence of China, Russia, and India, the unipolar moment—the global hierarchy of power with the undisputed United States at the top—is definitively over. The relative decline of Western power has flattened the global power hierarchy. In Europe, Russia challenges the regional hegemony of the United States; in the Middle East it is Iran; and in Asia, China.

However, whether this means the end of American hegemony remains far from certain. For smaller powers that feel threatened by these challenges, the U.S. remains an indispensable guarantor of security. Aside from India, the U.S. is the only major power with a growing population. With its solid lead in technology, financial markets, and military capabilities, it remains the *primus inter pares* at the top of the global hierarchy.

What will the future balance of power look like?

If Russia, India, and the European Union can overcome their internal weaknesses, they could become independent poles in a multipolar world order. However, if the gap between the two leading powers— the U.S. and China—continues to widen, a new bipolar power structure could emerge.

The world order that arises from these power dynamics will depend on relations among the great powers. The Trump administration is actively seeking a deal with Russia to end the war in Ukraine. Whether this results in merely a tactical realignment in an ongoing, hard-fought competition or leads to a strategic rapprochement—"Kissinger in reverse"—with Russia shifting to the American amp in its geopolitical rivalry with China remains an open question.

The future of U.S.-China relations is even more uncertain. Most observers assume that the United States' withdrawal from Eastern Europe and the transfer of European security responsibilities to Europe itself are aimed at concentrating the superpower's entire resources on the hegemonic conflict with China. However, an arrangement with China is also conceivable. At the end of his first term, Trump signed the "Phase-One Deal" with Beijing. The Biden administration also sought to ease tensions at a tactical level to prevent a military clash between the two nuclear powers.

Washington and Beijing are well aware of the warning from the Greek philosopher Thucydides that hegemonic conflicts between rising and declining powers are usually fought through war. However, simulations suggest that neither side could win a war against a nuclear-armed opponent. The great powers must therefore find a framework in which they can coexist peacefully.

Through its "Global Civilization Initiative", China has presented a vision for the peaceful coexistence of great powers in a multipolar world: a Schmittian *Großräume* order of culturally defined spheres in which rivals do not interfere with each other. These exclusive zones of influence would be embedded in a new concert of great powers, ensuring world peace through a continuously balanced equilibrium of forces. Such a system could be aligned with a reformed United Nations, where the Security Council would be adjusted to reflect the power dynamics of the 21st century.

The U.S. President's constant references to threatening the sovereignty of Denmark over Greenland, Panama, and Canada -- reminiscent of the Monroe Doctrine -- could also be aimed at establishing such a *Großraum* order. Coupled with the apparent willingness to effectively cede Ukraine to Russia, this suggests a shift toward a worldview structured around spheres of influence. In this model, China would dominate its sphere in East and Southeast Asia, Russia would maintain its old sphere of influence in its "near abroad", the post-Soviet and Eastern European regions, while the U.S. would retreat into the Western Hemisphere. In between, buffer zones would emerge, where the great powers would compete for influence.

Exclusive spheres of influence, where a great power can act at will, contradict the Westphalian principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs. The vast majority of smaller and medium-sized states therefore continue to favour a rules-based order in which the United Nations remains the multilateral framework for the Westphalian state system—though without the liberal elements of democracy promotion, which many perceive as intrusive. For the European Union, an entity constructed out of treaties and regulations, an unruly dog-eat-dog world could threaten its very existence. Whether smaller states can maintain their position depends on whether the great powers strike agreements at their expense or whether these states can exploit great power rivalries to play them against one another.

As long as the power struggles over the new geostrategic posture of the United States are raging, it would be premature to declare the end of the transatlantic alliance.

If the U.S. reaches an agreement with China and Russia on a *Großraum* order, it will retreat into its own hemisphere—sealing the fate of Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Taiwan. However, if great power competition continues in the primary battlegrounds of Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, Washington is likely to seek a renewal of the transatlantic alliance—though with a redefined burden-sharing arrangement and under the influence of right-wing populist forces.

A Europe whose fate depends on the unpredictable power struggles in the halls of Washington faces the prospect of becoming a plaything for the great powers. It is for that reason that after the collapse of the liberal world order, Europe must recalibrate its geopolitical posture to navigate a world driven by hard power.

Rigidly dividing the world into democratic and autocratic states, as we have been accustomed to do, is an obstacle to effective strategy. The EU's current values-based foreign policy, and that of a number of European countries, should give way to a realist approach that recognizes the limits of Europe's own capabilities. Rather than expending resources on security engagements in distant regions like the Indo-Pacific, where the EU's core interests are not directly at stake, the Europeans should focus on safeguarding their own continent and stabilizing Europe's volatile neighbourhood. Success will hinge on the EU's ability to forge strategic partnerships based on shared interests rather than ideological alignments. Europe must learn to define and pursue its interests independently. Even if the transatlantic partnership is renewed, Europe can no longer see itself as merely carrying out America's agenda—it must become sovereign.

In Germany, the "traffic light" coalition government of the SPD, Greens and FDP was elected before the "*Zeitenwende*", aka the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Since then, illusions regarding energy, fiscal, economic, defence, and migration policies have been shattered. Germany must prepare itself for a dangerous world where the American security guarantee is no longer limitless, where global success factors for its economic model are fading, and where society is increasingly torn by distributional and cultural conflicts.

Europe, particularly Germany, must rebuild its conventional deterrence capabilities and significantly boost defence spending beyond NATO's current 2 per cent of GDP target. Simultaneously, revitalising Germany's industrial base will require substantial investments in infrastructure (mobility, digitalisation, education), energy supply, and climate protection. Over the next few years, the necessary investments and expenses could amount to 4 per cent of GDP annually. This cannot be achieved within the constraints of the debt brake foolishly enshrined in the constitution—it will have to be lifted.

As the new government and other parties seek new answers, distributional battles over who bears the costs of necessary restructuring have already begun. Should it be the bottom third of social transfer recipients, which would spell the end of the welfare state as we know it? The middle third of white-collar workers, through higher taxes? That would contradict the current social contract. Or should it be the top third of capital owners through wealth and inheritance taxes? This would mark the end of neoliberalism in Germany. These pivotal decisions will upend the German party system, rendering it unrecognisable within a few years—much like in other European countries.

The perils of populism: the 'will of the People' as a Democratic Dilemma

Professor Albert Weale, Emeritus Professor of Political Theory and Public Policy

Populists of all persuasions are fond of invoking the idea of 'the will of the people' as the ultimate authority in a democracy. True to form, responding to the proposal from Merz that the current Bundestag could use its authority before its dissolution on 24 March to pass a reform to the debt brake to help fund further defence spending, Alice Weidel said that this ignored 'the will of the people'.

At first sight, these five little words seem to be a simple gloss on the idea of democracy. For what else does democracy mean if it is not that the people have ultimate power? But simple as this gloss appears, its repeated misuse, currently by parties of the extreme right in many countries, poses a serious risk for those who care about the integrity of constitutional democracies.

Taken as a short-hand for the results of an election or referendum, the phrase 'the will of the people' is a conventional, if somewhat lazy, way of referring to the result. You can say, if you wish, that the last election in Germany, like all elections, means that the German people have made choice and so expressed their will. But it only takes a little thought to realise that the result of any election is never clear cut. Whatever you think about the results of the 2025 German election, you cannot say that an electoral system that produces five parties in parliament, with no one party anywhere close to forming a majority and two parties only narrowly excluded, gives a singular result that can be graced with the name of the will of the people. It is simply the outcome of multiple forces.

But when populists use the idea of the will of the people they have in in a far more sinister assertion. For what they want to claim is that behind the observable realities of electoral processes in all their complexity, there lies a latent will embodied in the heartland of the people that is being frustrated by the rules of constitutional democracy. That is why they so often attack courts that make judgements about the constitutionality of government actions or draw attention to international treaty obligations.

So a central strategy of populist parties is to claim that they are the unique embodiment of the will of the people, a people's heartland that is being frustrated by the existing political system. In any political system there are inevitable discontents. Populists build their programme on combining the discontents of different citizens – about taxation, poor public services, an increase in migrants, a sense of a loss of national direction – into a programme that promises to sweep away the everyday frustrations of life. They are helped in this strategy by the tendency of many commentators to focus on the surge in relative support for particular parties rather than the overall pattern of growth that political parties experience. After all, a growth from 10% to 20% of the vote that the AfD experienced is compatible with an S-shaped growth of support over time getting close to its upper bound.

However, even if one takes a cautious view of the capacity of anti-system support to grow through increasing electoral support, there is a serious danger to the integrity of democracy from the populist strategy of stoking discontent. It used to be said that parties campaign in poetry and govern in prose. I doubt anyone can use the term 'poetry' for right-wing postings on social media. But their promises, however made, cannot withstand the test of the realities of governing. For all parties there is a cost to governing, as previously supportive voters find their hopes and aspirations dashed by the realities of what governments can do. When you project your fantasies onto the world of political choice, you are bound to be disappointed.

Where then is the threat to democracy? If a spell in government will soon lead to disappointment, why be so cautious about allowing the populist right, or the populist left as with the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht in Thuringia in 2024, into government so that their pretensions can be punctured? What have those committed to constitutional democracy to fear?

The answer to this question is provided by the present Trump administration. Once in government, populist parties have access to the levers of power, including appointment to public office, the control of public budgets, the willingness not to respect court judgements, information on political opponents and an ability to shape the media through denying access to briefings of critical journalists. Their rhetoric allows anti-liberal populist parties to claim that they are merely carrying out the will of the people. The courts strike down measures: they are the enemies of the people. International treaties impose obligations: these are obstacles to the realisation of the will of the people. Journalists write unflattering stories: raid their offices for evidence of disloyalty. Opposition parties campaign against the government's programme: use whatever procedural tactic to get the legislation through.

None of this need happen overnight. To describe a destination is not to write a timetable. Nor is it to predict the inevitable. But the price of political freedom is early vigilance. Complacency is not a viable strategy. Political parties committed to the fundamental principle of democracy – that democracy is a system of government and opposition to which the play of open and free competition of ideas and programmes is central – need to unite in agreement to maintain the future of that democracy. In this connection it is some help that subversive action by the Russian government is clearly implicated in the rise of populism. At least one source of the threat is tangible.

Germany, it is to be hoped, will show the way on this. German government and politics can be notoriously slow-moving. Now is the time for the German parties committed to constitutional democracy to find their supercharger and move quickly. Since 1949 Germany has played a central role in the construction of common European institutions. What was once a matter for NATO is now a matter for Europe and whatever allies it can muster to its cause. And if Germany needs to adapt quickly to a new world, so does the UK which might suddenly discover that its fate is intrinsically bound to Europe after all.

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