

# Germany's federal election: Is there any way back for the SPD?

*Germany is expected to hold its next federal election on 26 September. Uğur Tekiner assesses the prospects for the German Social Democrats, who currently sit in third place in the polling.*

Social democratic parties in Europe have been in a state of perpetual crisis over the last decade. The decline of once mighty centre-left parties in countries like France, Greece and the Netherlands has become so common that a new term – *Pasokification* – has been invented to describe it.

In Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has seen its support effectively halved from the 40.9 per cent it achieved in 1998 to just 20.5 per cent in the last German federal election in 2017. The party has now lost four federal elections in a row, while in the 2019 European Parliament elections it ended up in third place on just 15.8 per cent. Polls for this year's federal election, due in September, [suggest that](#) far from challenging for power, the SPD is struggling just to remain the country's second largest party.

Amid this turmoil, the election of Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans as new co-chairs of the SPD at the end of 2019 was welcomed as a potential turning point. Unfortunately for the party, a leadership change alone is unlikely to be enough to address the SPD's long-running problems – as shown with the fading of the '[Schulz effect](#)' at the last federal election. If the SPD is to revive its electoral fortunes in September, there are three key areas where it will need a radical overhaul.

## Ideological consistency

It has been decades since Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Blairite '*Neue Mitte*' (New Centre) approach dominated the party, but the SPD is still yet to find its ideological direction amid strategic and programmatic [uncertainty](#). To determine a clear ideological path, the SPD's last three chancellor candidates, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Peer Steinbrück and Martin Schulz, came up with virtually identical social justice promises. The successive electoral defeats they each suffered underlines that this message does not resonate well with the electorate.

Their failure was in no small part down to the disastrous legacy of the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV [reforms](#) implemented by Schröder's government, which continues to undermine the SPD's credibility in the realm of social justice. Instead of focusing on short-term strategies for winning elections, the SPD would be better served by attempting to convince the public it still stands as a people's party of the left with a clear social democratic agenda. This will require an emphasis on long-standing commitments to social democratic values, with current events approached through a consistent social justice discourse.

However, before deciding on its ideological course, the SPD needs to recall its *raison d'être*, regarding what, and whom, it stands for. This may necessitate some deep ideological soul-searching, similar to that which led to the '[Godesberg Programme](#)' in 1959 – a process that is badly needed given the critical juncture the party now finds itself at.

## Establishing political relevance

The SPD's struggles are part of a [wider crisis](#) affecting the political 'centre' in Germany. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has capitalised on political losses suffered by the SPD and the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) to rise to prominence, with the party now serving as the largest opposition faction in the Bundestag. The German Greens have also experienced a substantial increase in support, coming second in the 2019 European elections and polling strongly ahead of the 2021 elections.

The SPD's crisis, however, has been several orders of magnitude above anything affecting the Christian Democrats. The party is now striving to emerge as a politically relevant force again. It is widely acknowledged that this process will require some form of political 'renewal'. Beyond contemplating the meaning of social democracy in today's Germany, the party will also have to develop its own policy solutions to a broad range of problems.



Olaf Scholz, the SPD's lead candidate for the 2021 federal election, Credit: European Council

The rising popularity of the Greens is a case in point. At first glance, the unexpected surge of Green parties seen in several countries across Europe may be interpreted as a function of global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet it also reflects the inadequacy of social democratic parties in framing their appeals to the public. The SPD offers no exception in this context.

As such, it is no surprise the SPD has recently accorded greater importance to environmental concerns. But to establish political relevance, these issues will have to be implemented into the party's policy agenda in a credible fashion. Simply adopting the policy formulas of other actors prior to an election can only achieve so much. A better strategy would be forming consistent policy proposals that respond to environmental demands in line with the SPD's political philosophy.

### **Resolving the government formation question**

Grand coalitions between the Christian and Social Democrats, once considered something of an anomaly in German politics, have become the norm since the mid-2000s. While this has allowed the SPD to participate in recent governments, the persistent erosion of support it has experienced during this period has raised doubts from figures within the party over its government formation strategy. Many believe the SPD's political credibility and ideological cohesion have been undermined by its presence in grand coalitions. Two factors are of particular relevance in this context.

First, the SPD has largely failed to gain the upper hand during its time in government. As the junior partner to the Christian Democrats, the party has been unable to fulfil many of its key promises. Even when SPD-led policy reforms such as [the minimum wage](#) have been implemented, the Christian Democrats have often taken the credit. Ultimately, the CDU/CSU have called the shots in government, leaving the SPD in a difficult position.

Second, the ideological differences between the SPD and its Christian Democratic partner/rival have blurred considerably in office. Under Schröder's leadership, the SPD had already shifted to the centre. After sharing office with the Christian Democrats for more than a decade, the SPD is now regarded by many observers as having undergone a further shift toward the CDU/CSU on an ideological level.

An important element in this is Angela Merkel's pragmatic approach, which has been criticised by some members of the CDU for shifting the party to the left. By adopting key social democratic policy positions, she has effectively taken over some of the core elements of the SPD's identity. This has entrenched the perception that the SPD is now little more than a junior coalition partner for the CDU/CSU, particularly among younger voters.

In the past, the SPD has consistently found itself caught between a rock and a hard place. If it had refused to participate in previous grand coalitions, it would have been called upon to act in the national interest. Yet by entering government, its electoral support has continued to erode. This time around, however, the calculation may be different. There is a sense that another grand coalition may further aid the rise of the AfD and that the SPD pursuing a process of renewal in the opposition ranks would thus not only be in the party's interest, but would also help safeguard German democracy.

Given this background, the obvious path forward for the SPD is to rid itself of the image of a junior coalition partner and reclaim its status as a credible contender for power. This will require highlighting the ideological boundaries between the party and the CDU/CSU. While there appears little question of the SPD winning the 2021 federal election, this process would undo the perception that the party has shifted too much to the centre in its pursuit of short-term electoral gains, all while undermining its political and ideological character.

With the SPD struggling for survival, the only option ahead must be to reclaim social democracy and reconnect with the electorate. The alternative is to face further political marginalisation.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)*

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