

Despite riding high in the polls, a coalition with the CDU/CSU may be the only route for the German Greens to enter government in the 2013 Elections.

by Blog Admin

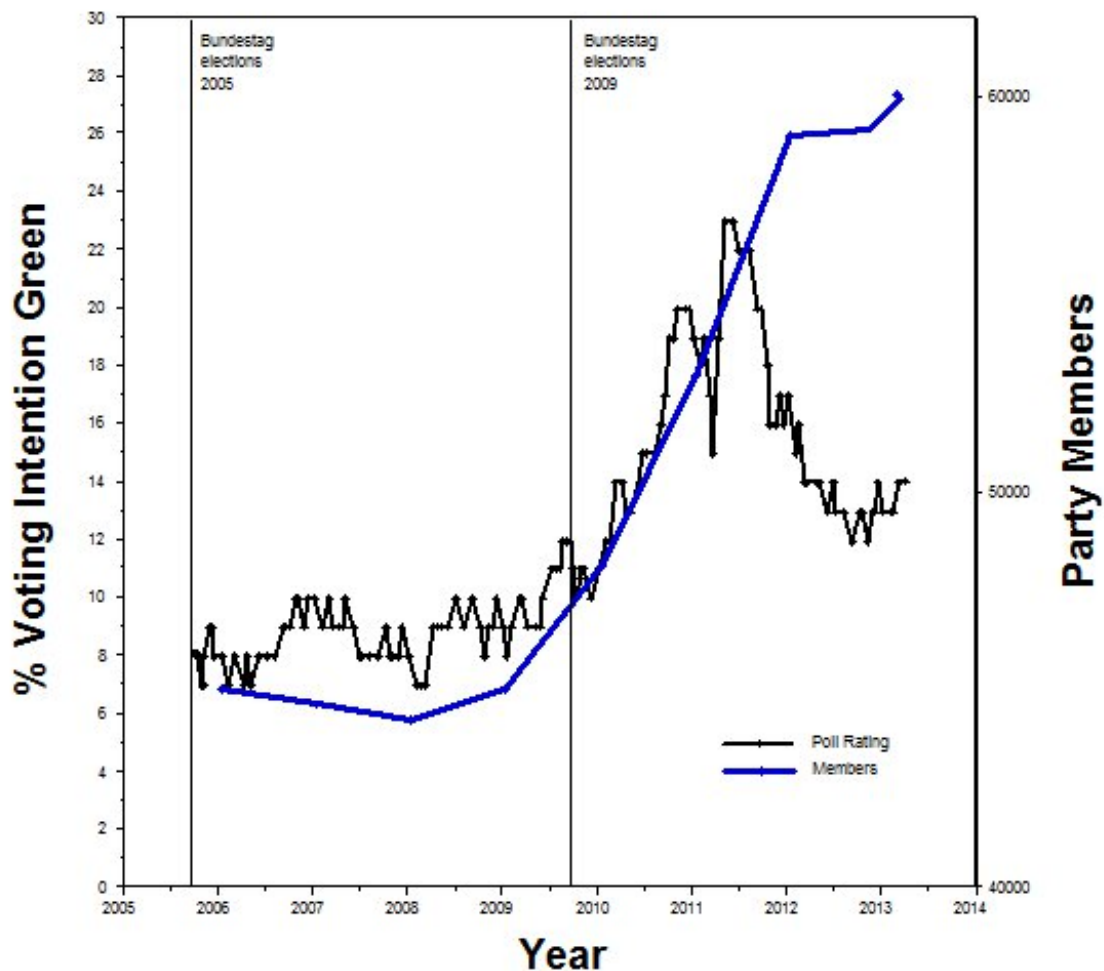
Federal elections are due to be held in Germany on 22nd September this year. As part of EUROPP's series profiling the main parties in the election, [Wolfgang Rüdig](#) assesses the prospects of the German Greens. Although the party's standing in opinion polls is extremely healthy, the weakness of its preferred partner, the SPD, might make a coalition with Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU the only option for entering government. However this strategy could prove unpopular and generate tensions between the two competing wings of the party.



The German Greens had a good start to 2013. In the regional elections in Lower Saxony on 20th January, they achieved their best ever result in the state: 13.7 per cent, a major increase compared with their previous record of 8 per cent in 2008. Although their intended coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), weakened, the strength of the Greens was sufficient to give a 'red-green' coalition [\[1\]](#) a majority in the regional parliament, ensuring a return to government in Lower Saxony. Will this set a pattern for the federal elections to be held later this year?

The Greens are currently standing at between 14 per cent and 17 per cent in the [national polls](#), several points above their record 10.7 per cent achieved in the last federal elections of 2009. Since their participation in the federal government came to an end in 2005, the Greens have managed to consolidate their position in German politics (as shown in Figure 1 below). Following the nuclear accident at Fukushima in March 2011, green electoral support rose to unprecedented levels, with their national poll rating topping 20 per cent. In Baden-Württemberg, the Greens beat the SPD into second place for the first time in any state election, resulting in the first 'green-red' government led by a Green state prime minister, Winfried Kretschmann. With electoral successes also in East Germany, the Greens are since 2011 represented in all 16 German regional parliaments for the first time. In six of these states (Baden-Württemberg, Bremen, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Schleswig-Holstein) representing 54 per cent of the German population, the Greens are in power together with the SPD. The Greens are also benefitting from a rapid rise in party members, with the [total number of members](#) passing the 60,000 mark in February.

Figure 1: Alliance '90/The Greens Voting Intention and Party Members (2005-2013)



Sources: Voting Intention: *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (prediction)*; **Party Membership:** *Oskar Niedermayer, Parteimitglieder in Deutschland, <http://www.gruene.de/>*

Overall, the Greens look to be in a very strong position. While the political dream of replacing the SPD as the main centre-left party, provoked by their rise in the wake of the Fukushima accident, may go unrealised; the Greens' polling numbers have stabilised in the mid teens, even after the Merkel government's U-turn to reinstate the policy of phasing out nuclear energy. This confirms that the Greens can rely on core support that is largely independent of the salience of environmental and energy policy issues, deeply rooted in the political experiences of the generations socialised by the student protest and new social movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. As the share of these age cohorts in the electorate as a whole is currently rising, modest increases in green electoral fortunes *could thus be expected* for some years to come.

But will the Greens be able to turn this to their advantage in terms of government participation following the federal elections of 22 September 2013? The party is going into the election campaign with the declared aim of forming a 'red-green' coalition with the Social Democrats. The problem for the Greens is that the SPD is struggling to reverse the losses it has suffered in the 2000s, polling below the 30 per cent mark at present. With the problems experienced by the SPD's 'chancellor candidate', Peer Steinbrück, since his nomination, it looks rather unlikely that the Social Democrats could improve substantially on their level of electoral support.

The Greens managed to return to government in Lower Saxony also because the party *Die Linke (The Left)* failed to gain representation, and a return to federal government for 'red-green' is unlikely unless the decline of *The Left* accelerates dramatically during 2013. Even more than 20 years after the end of the Communist regime in East Germany, *The Left* continues to find it difficult to gain credibility and is still regarded as a 'pariah' party with whom neither the Social Democrats nor the Greens are prepared to enter a coalition at federal level. While a 'red-red-green' coalition is thus off the agenda, one open question in 2013

is how badly the party will be damaged electorally. Polling just above the 5 per cent threshold, *The Left*, beset by deep internal divisions, appears vulnerable. However, the electoral rule that any party winning three constituencies will be represented according to its share of the (second) vote – even if it fails to poll more than 5 per cent nationally – gives *The Left* a safety cushion to fall back on, although a change in the social make-up of its traditional strongholds in East Berlin may eventually pose an [important threat](#) to its political survival at federal level. For 2013, however, it would be bold to predict that *The Left* would fail to be elected to the *Bundestag*, and thus it seems unlikely that a collapse of *The Left* could offer the SPD and Greens a path to a majority.

Also alternative coalition options involving the Free Democrats, such as the ‘Traffic Light’ coalition (SPD, FDP, and Greens) or the ‘Jamaica’ coalition (CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens) appear off the agenda, as the gulf between the Greens and the FDP has widened substantially in recent years. Provided that the current government parties (CDU/CSU and FDP) fail to win a majority, as the current polls predict, this leaves only one realistic alternative to a ‘grand coalition’ of Christian and Social Democrats: ‘black-green’. Thus, the key question of the 2013 elections might turn out to be: Will the Greens be prepared to enter a coalition with the Christian Democrats?

A Black-Green Coalition?

Before election day, we are unlikely to get a true assessment of the likelihood of ‘black-green’ from either side. The CDU/CSU will campaign for a continuation of the present government; the Greens are committed to campaigning for a ‘red-green’ coalition. A few years ago, the Green position had been rather different. In the years after 2005, the option of the Greens repositioning themselves in a more centrist location, escaping the dependency on the SPD as a political partner and becoming open to the idea of coalitions with the CDU, was all the rage, particularly for the *Realo* faction. As the CDU under Angela Merkel became more centrist and liberal on social issues, and particularly after the government embraced opposition to nuclear energy in 2011, the policy differences between Greens and Christian Democrats appear smaller than ever before.

Paradoxically, however, the ‘black-green’ vision is less popular now than at the time of the last federal elections in 2009. Why? I think there are three main reasons. First, there is the actual experience of coalitions with the CDU at regional level. The first ‘black-green’ coalition emerged in the city-state of Hamburg in 2008 and collapsed in late 2010, following a defeat for a green-inspired reform of education policy. The first ‘Jamaica’ coalition had been formed in the Saarland in 2009 and also came to a premature end in early 2012, mainly as a result of problems within the FDP. Whatever the individual circumstances, these two regional governments constituted a test of whether the Greens could successfully work together with the CDU, and the experience was not entirely positive. Without a successful example at regional level to follow, a ‘black-green’ coalition at federal level may be seen by many (on both sides) as a highly risky experiment. And while the CDU in Hamburg and the Saarland is seen as fairly liberal, Greens in a federal coalition would have to co-operate also with more conservative parts of the CDU as well as the Bavarian CSU: a far more daunting prospect.

Secondly, there is the question of how green voters would react to the idea of a coalition with the Christian Democrats, keeping Chancellor Merkel in power. Historically, green voters have located themselves on the left of the political spectrum. For most potential green voters, the main alternative is to vote SPD. While the Greens have become more ‘centrist’ compared with the 1980s and 1990s, green voters in 2012 still locate themselves to the left of all major parties, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Self Perception of German Voters by Party (2012)

Party	Average self-placement of voters on a left-right scale from 1 to 10 (1 = left, 10 = right)
Die Linke (The Left)	3.0
Alliance '90/The Greens	4.1
SPD	4.4
Pirate Party	4.5
FDP	5.5
CDU/CSU	5.6

Source: Forsa Polling Institute, in *Manfred Güllner (2012) Die Grünen: Höhenflug oder Absturz? Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder: P.99*

Having campaigned for a 'red-green' coalition, would a decision to enter a Merkel government after the elections be tolerated by green voters? Potential green voters certainly do not consider the Federal Chancellor to be particularly abhorrent. In an [internal survey](#) of potential green voters commissioned by the Greens, 81 per cent considered Angela Merkel to be competent or very competent, and almost 50 per cent found her to be "sympathisch" (likeable). However, asked about coalition preferences, only 10 per cent opted for 'black-green' and 72 per cent supported 'red-green'. Perhaps most importantly, 55 per cent of potential green voters [indicated](#) they would not vote green if the party were to enter a coalition with the Christian Democrats. Given these figures, a decision to form a 'black-green' coalition after the elections in September would be a bold move and could see the Greens in a situation not dissimilar to that of the Liberal Democrats in the UK, with the party potentially suffering a substantial haemorrhaging of electoral support.

Thirdly, and perhaps decisively, it will be up to the Green leadership and the activists to make the decision. Any coalition agreement will have to be approved by a special party conference. The Greens may have abandoned the more extreme versions of 'grassroots democracy' as impractical, but their internal decision making process still gives local activists a major say, and they will not necessarily follow the party line as defined by the leadership. Any Green politician entering coalition talks with the CDU and CSU will see the possibility of the agreement being rejected by the activists as a major obstacle.

Internal Divisions

The question of a 'black-green' coalition could also re-awaken the factional divide within the party that has been present since the 1980s. Both factions, the Realos and the Left^[1], have managed to settle their differences mainly in private in recent years, with the Greens assiduously presenting an image of unity at their party conferences. Only rarely the divisions have come out into the open, for example after the [Berlin elections of 2011](#). The relative strength of each faction is thus difficult to gauge, but there are indications that the [Realo wing has lost some influence](#).

Key conference decisions after 2005 went in favour of the Left, who promoted a more critical attitude to Germany's military presence abroad and a return to a stronger commitment to social justice. Many leading Realos have left the Berlin scene: Joschka Fischer retired from party politics; Reinhard Bütikofer is co-leader of the European Green Party; Fritz Kuhn has been elected Lord Mayor of Stuttgart, the first green mayor of a state capital. Many others, in particular those associated with neo-liberal ideas about economic policy and welfare reform (Matthias Berninger, Oswald Metzger, Margareta Wolf, Christine Scheel), have left the party in recent years. Other Realos who could play a starring role at national level have so far eschewed the move to Berlin (e.g. Tarek Al-Wazir and Boris Palmer). The most prominent Realo in the federal parliamentary party is Renate Künast who used to be extremely popular with activists in the 2000s, but her image has been dented by what was seen as a disappointing performance as lead candidate in the Berlin elections of 2011.

Nevertheless, the primary [elections](#) in which the two lead candidates for the 2013 federal election campaign were chosen by the party members led to a surprising result. While the long-time leader of the Left, Jürgen Trittin, was elected with 72 per cent of votes, his main Real adversary, Renate Künast, only came fourth with 39 per cent (Party members had two votes) : members voted instead for Katrin Göring-Eckhart (47 per cent) to lead the party in the campaign. This could be seen as a sign that a substantial sector within the Greens may be willing to entertain an opening to the centre-right: Göring-Eckhart comes from Thuringia in East Germany, was active in the civic rights movement and has held leading offices in the Protestant church.

If 'black-green' should indeed turn out to be the only alternative to a 'grand coalition', and if CDU and CSU are willing to negotiate with them, then the Greens will be faced with a very difficult decision. The option of re-entering government would surely be tempting as an alternative to four more years in opposition. The party leadership may want to avoid an open discussion about that option until after the elections. However, this may be difficult as some on the left may be tempted to force the issue by asking the election party conference in April 2013 to exclude the possibility of 'black-green' and thus remove any doubts about post-election coalition choices in the minds of potential green voters. Thirty years after first entering the *Bundestag* in 1983, questions about the relationship between party and power thus continue to be an important topic in the development of the Greens.

1) The characterisation of coalitions with reference to colours is based on the colours associated with each political party: CDU/CSU: black; FDP: yellow; SPD: red; Alliance '90/The Greens: green; and The Left: red.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Wolfgang Rüdig – *University of Strathclyde*

Wolfgang Rüdig is Reader in the School of Government and Public Policy at the University of Strathclyde. He has published extensively on green parties and environmental movements, comparative environmental/energy policy, political behaviour, and West European (particularly German) politics.



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