

Six things to know about the German election



Ahead of Germany's federal election on 24 September, [Manès Weisskircher](#) highlights six things to know as voters go to the polls. While many observers are expecting a clear victory for Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU, the performance of smaller parties will also be keenly followed as it is highly likely there will be as many as six parties (or seven including the CSU) represented in the Bundestag.



Angela Merkel, Credit: [Markus Spiske \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

Next Sunday, about 61.5 million Germans are entitled to vote. The expected fourth consecutive victory for Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats is a crucial, but far from the only important aspect of the Bundestag election. Here are six things you need to know about one of the key political events of 2017.

1. The meaning of silence: The Eurozone's absence from the campaign

Let us begin with what the election campaign has *not* been about: the Eurozone crisis – an issue that shaped the public agenda of Germany until the summer of 2015. Granted, the composition of the new coalition government [will be important](#) for economic policy in Europe, including the next more or less substantial reform of the Eurozone.

Still, Germany's major political players have preferred not to politicise the issue despite, or because of, the debates being held elsewhere, such as the French proposals on the deepening of European economic integration, the question over debt relief in Greece and discussions on alternatives to the euro in Italy. Most strikingly, in the only TV debate between Angela Merkel and Martin Schulz, the two politicians did not discuss the Eurozone. Instead, it was another topic framed in a European context that overshadowed any other issue: the so-called refugee crisis.

2. Angela Merkel – another decisive victory

In the second half of 2015, Angela Merkel reinvented herself, not for the first time. Back then, she became widely known, in Germany and beyond, for a liberal stance on asylum and immigration. [Reports](#) that her government had planned to close down the border to Austria in mid-September 2015 – a decision that was only reversed at the very last moment and primarily because of self-serving concerns – could not tarnish this image. This time around, Merkel [has argued](#) that the efforts of 2015 are something that Germans should be proud of, but which should not be repeated. If the [polls](#) are correct, her CDU, together with their Bavarian ‘sister party’ the CSU, will gain 35 to 40 percent of the vote, clearly winning her fourth Bundestag election as the centre-right’s candidate for Chancellor.

Merkel’s political success story is remarkable. Initially perceived as lacking charisma, she only narrowly beat Gerhard Schröder’s SPD in 2005, even though a landslide victory for her was expected. But soon after, Merkel’s increasing popularity could no longer be halted, even by some serious flip-flopping, like when she moved back from her extension of the ‘Red-Green’ [nuclear power phase-out](#) period after the Fukushima disaster in Japan.

Beyond the traditional strength of the centre-right in Germany, commentators often attribute Merkel’s success to a strategy of passivity. Instead of pushing forward with her own initiatives, Merkel rather responds to what is politically salient, often very late in the day and after the dust has settled. Pundits have called her approach ‘[asymmetric demobilisation](#)’ – by moving to the centre on some issues, the SPD struggles to mobilise sections of its own potential support base. At a party congress, Merkel’s Social Democratic contender Martin Schulz called this approach an “attack on democracy” – a wording which he later refused to repeat. Still, a previous observation of a well-known pundit, that “[Merkel does not win, her opponents lose](#)”, has not done full justice to her strategic skills in not only winning elections, but winning them decisively.

3. The Social Democratic Party – in a never-ending crisis?

In 2013, after gaining another bad result (25.7%), Sigmar Gabriel, then SPD party leader and soon Vice Chancellor, made a smart move. Holding an intra-party referendum on the coalition agreement with the Christian Democrats, he made sure that some important demands would find their way into government policy. The introduction of a minimum wage was one of these. Nevertheless, this did not help the party’s public support. Welfare state retrenchment under Schröder has cast a long shadow and has aided the establishment of the left-wing *Die Linke* as electoral competition.

Still, despite these long-term problems for the SPD, at the beginning of 2017 it suddenly looked like the party could actually challenge the dominance of Merkel. In accordance with a decision made by the party leadership, Gabriel proposed Martin Schulz, the former President of the European Parliament, as the SPD’s leading candidate for Chancellor. Quicker than even Schulz could have hoped for, his poll numbers rose to almost match Merkel’s, and the outcome of the election suddenly seemed to be open. However, after a few weeks this ‘Schulz effect’ turned out to be merely a flash in the pan. The candidate failed to substantiate his spontaneous popularity by formulating and popularising policy demands, such as “[credible social welfare and redistributive policies](#)”, that would put pressure on the incumbent Chancellor. Polls now predict only 20-25 percent of the vote will go to the Social Democrats.

While the SPD publicly claims to still hope for undecided voters, political observers have largely written Merkel’s challenger off. Still, the brief ‘Schulz effect’ might indicate that if he had campaigned differently, another electoral outcome would have been possible – Merkel’s position might not have been as untouchable as it now again seems. As for what lies next for the SPD, the party will either stay as the junior coalition partner of the CDU/CSU or it will become Germany’s main opposition party, which may give it the chance “[to regroup and reflect](#)”. Previous experience suggests that in both cases a revival of the SPD will be difficult to achieve.

4. A radical right party in the Bundestag: the AfD

For the first time ever, a radical right party will surpass the five percent threshold and enter the Bundestag. Starting out as an expression of [neoliberal opposition](#) to the Eurozone, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) managed to reach 4.7 percent of the vote in 2013. A year later, the AfD entered the European Parliament with slightly over seven percent of the vote, matching the record result for a far right party at national-level elections in the Federal Republic: In 1989, *Die Republikaner* gained 7.1 percent in that year's European Parliament election. However, similar to other German far right parties such as the NPD or the DVU, *Die Republikaner* [failed to consolidate](#) their short-term success. Not so the AfD.

The radical right faction of the party [took over](#) in the summer of 2015, when the AfD's founder, MEP Bernd Lucke, suffered a decisive defeat in an intra-party struggle and left, together with some of his supporters. Frauke Petry became one of the two new party leaders. Despite this break with the party's origins, its internal struggles remained – peaking with the sidelining of party leader Petry ahead of the 2017 campaign. This might be part of the explanation for why the likely result of the AfD will be below its peak poll numbers of slightly above 15 percent only a year ago. Nevertheless, the AfD – notably without a charismatic leader at the helm – will establish itself as a major radical right party in German politics. The party's future impact on the party system, and especially on the CDU/CSU, remains to be seen.

5. The return of the Liberals makes the Bundestag a six-party legislature

In 2013, the liberal FDP suffered a crushing electoral defeat: After four years as junior coalition partner to Merkel, the party was voted out of parliament, for the very first time in its proud history. Following that disastrous result, a comeback was far from clear. But it seems certain that the FDP is about to return, with its young party leader Christian Lindner building support around talk of a liberal 'lifestyle' and the importance of digitalisation – while also calling for stronger regulation of immigration.

Unsurprisingly, *The Economist* has already [stated its support](#) for a return of the FDP to national government as part of a three-party 'Jamaica coalition' with Merkel's CDU/CSU and the Greens. But even if the FDP does not end up in the next German government, their return from extra-parliamentary opposition must be seen as a notable success – facilitated through the help of financially strong donors. By the beginning of August, the FDP had received [almost eight times as many](#) donations above €50,000 than the SPD and the Greens together, while only the Christian Democrats received more financial support from donations of this type.

With the AfD and the FDP entering the Bundestag, for the first time ever six parties will pass the five percent threshold (or seven if the CDU and CSU are counted as separate parties). So far, polls do not provide a clear picture of which of the four parties behind the CDU/CSU and the SPD will become the third strongest.

6. The Left and the Greens: no agenda setters

The only two opposition parties currently in the Bundestag will not be the headliners of this year's election coverage. While *Die Linke* might lose its position as the strongest opposition group in parliament, the polls nevertheless predict a stable result for the party. Since 2005, the radical left has never received less than eight percent. However, its social and economic policy demands have not strongly shaped mainstream political discourse in recent months. A similar disappointment, at least for the office-seeking wing of *Die Linke*, is that with the SPD in such a weak state there is no prospect of coalition participation at the national level.

The Greens have also not been at the centre of attention. Some demands made by the party, such as an end for new registrations of internal combustion engine cars by 2030, have also led to intraparty conflict. Winfried Kretschmann, *Ministerpräsident* of Baden-Württemberg, a centre for the car industry, has rejected such a deadline. Beyond Baden-Württemberg, the Greens currently govern in seven more German regions. Also at the national level, the party leadership clearly follows an office-seeking approach. While increasingly engaging in [rhetorical skirmishes](#) with the FDP, the Greens' flexibility on policy ensures a 'Jamaica coalition' remains a real possibility. Still, whether the Greens will govern or not may ultimately depend less on themselves and more on those that will remain the main players of German politics after 24 September: Angela Merkel and her fellow Christian Democrats.

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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.

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