

The silent rise of Germany's Green party



Growth in support for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has been a key talking point in German politics since the 2017 federal elections, but as [Leopold Traugott](#) writes, the AfD is not the only German party currently riding high in the polls. The German Greens have also seen their support increase in the last year, with the party representing a clearly defined alternative to the nationalist vision of the AfD.

Foreign media coverage of Germany is often fixated on the rise of the country's new far-right, nativist party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). No wonder. After all, the blatantly anti-mainstream, anti-Merkel party has dramatically shaken up German politics, which was long thought immune to such machinations.

Yet by focusing almost exclusively on the narrative of a Germany tilting dangerously to the right, combined with the perceived *Götterdämmerung* of Chancellor Angela Merkel, observers abroad are missing out. Other less flashy, but still substantial developments are brushed under the carpet. With few stories is this as true as with the recent rise of Germany's Green Party.

Where the AfD often represents a Germany gazing back to the idolised image of a closed off, communitarian society, the Greens have managed to arise as the key representatives of the diametrically opposite image – a Germany that is socially liberal, open to immigration, and outward looking. And as a string of recent polls show, they are doing quite a good job at this.

In last year's federal elections, the Greens still entered German parliament as the smallest party, with just 8.9% of the vote. Since then however they have, together with the AfD, been the only party continuously on the rise. The latest [polls](#) put the Greens at between 13% and 16% – no massive numbers, but enough to put them on par with the AfD. In some recent surveys, the Green party has even moved ahead of its far-right competitor. The Social Democrats, still the second strongest party in German politics and historically often electorally two to three times as strong as the Greens, are now merely a few percentage points ahead.



Annalena Baerbock, co-leader of Alliance 90/The Greens, Credit: [Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Nordrhein-Westfalen](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Admittedly, you can't entirely hold it against the foreign media to be less fascinated with the recent rise of the Greens than with the AfD. The Green Party is no "new kid on the block", but has been in parliament since 1983, already formed part of two federal governments, and currently co-governs 10 of Germany's 16 states. Where the AfD challenges the very core of Germany's contemporary political mainstream, the Green Party actually had an integral part in forming it.

Nevertheless, if you want to understand German politics, closely watching this party over the coming months will be crucial. If the Greens are lucky, they may soon turn from a minor coalition-sidekick into a decisive player. They would do so not as the great disruptor to the status quo, but as the most clearly defined counter-model to Germany's growing nativist fringes.

In their recent rise, the Greens simultaneously embody a particular threat to Germany's two traditional political behemoths. The Social Democrats are still lost in fruitless soul-searching after their two-decade long decline culminated in an historic electoral defeat last year. As they try to find a new balance between the party's traditional working-class voters on the one hand, and young, metropolitan and pro-European supporters on the other, it is the Greens who increasingly (and successfully) woo the latter.

At the same time, the Greens are in an ideal position to become the new political home for many centrist supporters of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) who feel alienated by the parties' rhetorical tack to the right. In Bavaria, for example, where the CSU has marched strongly to the right in an attempt to win back voters from the AfD, the Greens have reached an [unprecedented high](#). Whether this can become a permanent shift or remains temporary will also depend on which course the CDU and CSU steer post-Merkel.

It seems odd, to some degree, that Germany's formerly foremost 'hippy party' is now poaching voters from the traditionally centre-right CDU and CSU. But as German politics is in flux, the Greens have gradually changed tack. In the German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, they have already become the [dominant party](#) in a coalition with Merkel's CDU as their junior partner.

Most recently, they [abandoned](#) their complex internal power-sharing arrangement of balancing leadership positions between left-wing "fundis" (for fundamentalists) and more centrist "realos" (for *Realpolitik*). The winners were the "realos" – and with them, the party's overall electability. In a country like Germany, where elections are generally won in the political centre, such moves often pay off.

The extent to which the Greens will be able to transform their current popularity into hard electoral gains still remains to be seen. Germany's next federal elections may still be three years away, but state elections in Bavaria are coming up in October and promise an interesting test run. As Bavaria's traditionally dominant conservatives are tumbling, both the AfD and the Greens are currently predicted to be in a close run for second place. Should the Greens manage to win this duel, perhaps the party will start attracting greater attention abroad. It would certainly make for more balanced coverage of German politics.

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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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