

# The Bundestag Election 2025

## I: In Thuringia: from Election to Government

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### [Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea](#)

This post discusses the election to the state parliament in Thuringia in September 2024 and the subsequent process of negotiation which culminated in the formation of a new coalition government led by the CDU. Three things of wider importance emerge from this discussion.

The first is how a German parliamentary election works and how the subsequent negotiations to form a coalition proceed. Before a new government can take office, it must command the support of a majority of the members of the new parliament.

The second is how the so-called “firewall” – the long-standing agreement among the other parties to shun the AfD and have nothing to do with it – is so much more problematic when it is the largest party in parliament, as it is now in Thuringia.

The third is how the populist threat lies not only in the numbers but also in the temptation to centrist parties to adopt the populist’s one-sided view of political problems. In Thuringia, centrist parties were guilty of nothing more than accommodating a one-sided view of the Ukraine war as the price of enticing a populist party to join a coalition. But yielding once on the grounds of expediency prepares the way for yielding again.

**A German election combines two votes in one – in Thuringia the AfD won both** German parliaments, state and federal, have two kinds of elected representative, in roughly equal number. The first are those directly elected to represent a constituency. The second are those drawn from a party list. Constituency contests are decided by first-past-the-post. The number of list representatives each party gets is designed to bring its total parliamentary strength into line with its share of the party vote. As befits what is really two elections in one – first-past-the-post wrapped up in PR – German voters get two votes, one for the constituency and one for a party.

In Thuringia in September 2024, candidates of the far-right Alliance for Deutschland (AfD) won 29 of the 44 constituencies. Its state-wide share of the party vote entitled it to 32 seats in the 88-seat parliament, meaning it got three list representatives.<sup>1</sup> On both measures – constituencies won and the party vote – not only did the AfD come first but it did so by a wide margin, the second placed CDU trailing with just 23 representatives, of which 11 were constituency wins.

Having come first, the AfD was not out of order to try to open negotiations with other parties over the formation of a new state government that it would lead. But nothing came of attempt because taking part in negotiations is voluntary and all other parties have pledged, not just in Thuringia but nationwide, not to work with the AfD. Instead, it was negotiations opened by the CDU which eventually bore fruit, culminating three months later in a coalition taking office headed by the CDU's lead candidate, Mario Voigt.<sup>2</sup>

### **The AfD's parliamentary strength now shapes Thuringian politics – even out of government**

This refusal to co-operate with, or indeed try to do something which would need AfD support in order to succeed, is what is known as the firewall. The AfD did so well in Thuringia, however, that the firewall is no longer sufficient to prevent it from wielding constitutional power.

Compared with the last election, in 2019, the AfD's share of the party vote rose from 24 to 33 per cent. With voter turnout rising sharply too, the AfD's vote tally went up by more than a half.

This success was not due to any "moderation" on the party's part; on the contrary. The extent to which different parts of the AfD are judged to be "far-right extremist" by Germany's "Office for the Protection of the Constitution" varies.<sup>3</sup> At the federal level, in a judgement supported by the courts in 2024, the AfD is held to be a "suspected case",. The Thuringian branch, however, led by Björn Höcke, was designated to be "proven far-right extremist" back in 2021.

Höcke, who has a track record of using banned Nazi-era language and slogans, lost his bid to win a constituency, opposition to him coalescing around the candidate best placed to beat him. This is a reminder that even on its chosen turf, it is still only a minority of Thuringians who back the AfD. Höcke still made it into parliament via the party list.<sup>4</sup>

A report analysing the AfD's digital campaign in the election identified three main themes: the war in Ukraine, migration and internal security. On the war, AfD messages criticised the federal government for supporting Ukraine and/or for being a warmonger. Messages about migration also referenced "re-migration", that is, the expulsion of those born outside Germany, including second or third generation immigrants.<sup>5</sup>

With 32 seats in an 88-seat parliament, the AfD doesn't need to be in government to have an impact. Certain matters of a constitutional nature – for example, the appointment of judges – need a two-third majority. The AfD, with more than a third of the seats, can block them. One analysis points to four other aspects of the workings of the state that the AfD could block.<sup>6</sup> This gives it leverage and means that while it can still be shunned, it can no longer be ignored.

The AfD's 32 seats also means that any coalition without it needs most other parties in order to assemble a majority. The risk in this situation is that arithmetic trumps politics. Party political differences must either be set aside or fudged. If they are willing to remain in opposition, small parties can name their price. Besides the CDU's 23, the other representatives in the parliament are made up of six from the SPD, 12 from Die Linke and 15 from BSW.

Even with the SPD – a regular fixture of Thuringian governments – the CDU's only hope of a parliamentary majority lay in seeking the embrace of the BSW. Just months old, the BSW won no constituencies but got 16 per cent of the party vote. The only snag? The BSW is anti-migrant, anti-West and anti-war.

### The BSW's curious condition for entering negotiations: a statement on the war in Ukraine?

With her name a part of its name, it is natural that the BSW is sometimes called Sahra Wagenknecht's party, or even just the Wagenknecht party. This isn't just about branding. It's also about control. The BSW is a top-down affair, with decisions taken and priorities set at the very top, by Wagenknecht herself and a small group of close allies.<sup>7</sup>

The BSW's condition for taking part in coalition negotiations was that they must consider Germany's part in the war in Ukraine: the "peace question". Two things are odd about it. First, the Ukraine war is a federal responsibility not a state one. Imposing a condition that is practically irrelevant shows how important it is to the BSW leadership. Second, one would expect such a condition to concern things which a state government can influence. So what might account for the absence of any such Thuringia-specific condition??

In an interview with the outgoing Minister-President of Thuringia, Die Linke's Bodo Ramelow pointed to the absence of BSW answers to everyday problems. He saw this as typical of populism, new to Germany but long familiar elsewhere. In line with this, he described the BSW's manifesto in Thuringia as a "Berlin cut-and-paste". With few members, the BSW locally, he added, would not be free to negotiate a coalition agreement.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect at least, Thuringia sprung a surprise. Contrary to expectations, the BSW in Thuringia did push back against Wagenknecht, looking to reach an agreement with the CDU-SPD. When agreement was reached, it was hailed by the three party leaders in Thuringia as “pragmatism instead of ideology”.<sup>9</sup>

The BSW’s “peace question” met a different fate in each state. In Saxony, the BSW pulled out of negotiations. Differences over Ukraine was one of the reasons. In Brandenburg, the introduction to the coalition agreement includes a joint statement about the war by the two coalition partners, the SPD and BSW, together. By contrast, the introduction in Thuringia includes two statements, one from the BSW and the other from the CDU and SPD. An editorial in the weekly “Der Spiegel” took a look at the differences between the two states’ coalition agreements.

In Thuringia, Der Spiegel thought it telling that the BSW saw its “uncompromising commitment to peace” as being in contrast to the CDU/SPD’s adherence to the tradition of the “Western Alliance and Ostpolitik”. At a time when Ukraine, supported by this alliance, is resisting invasion, a “commitment to peace” can have more than one meaning, something the title of the editorial, “Putin can be pleased”, makes quite clear.<sup>10</sup>

The newspaper criticised Brandenburg’s statement, which spoke of “Germany being pulled into an ever faster spiral of war”, for breathing the spirit of the BSW. The SPD’s endorsement had “ennobled” that spirit, a “fatal” mistake, it said, which destroyed the argument against including a descendant of the old East German ruling party, of which the BSW is one, in a federal-level coalition because of its foreign policy.

There’s one more twist to this tale of negotiation: with just 44 of the 88 seats in the parliament, the three-party coalition lacks a majority. The immediate challenge this presented was to avoid the possibility that the CDU’s Mario Voigt had only been confirmed as Thuringia’s new Minister-President because of AfD votes. To avoid this, a limited deal was struck between the Coalition and Die Linke in return for at least some of the latter’s votes being cast for Voigt. In the event, Voigt won parliament’s approval, by 51 to 33 with four abstentions.<sup>11</sup> The new government that took office had taken over 100 days to come into being.

## Centrists and the temptation of populism

When centrist governments nod in a populist direction, it is to try to restore a balance between values that have clashed with one-another: Ukraine’s right to defend itself versus peace across Europe, or migrants’ rights versus the state’s duty to provide security. Such clashes cannot but be divisive for centrist parties. To contain the division opened by such clashes, re-balancing is presented as a limited remedy to a practical policy failure.

It is impossible to tell whether the BSW will clear the five per cent hurdle to enter the Bundestag, never mind join coalition negotiations. But if so, these state-level agreements are an omen. Populists don’t face the clashes that agonise centrists because they have abandoned one of the values in each pair (here: Ukraine’s right to defend itself; migrants’ rights). This leaves them free to embrace the other value (“peace”; “security”) without

reserve: a comfortable place to be so long as you don't catch sight by accident of what you've chosen not to see.

As some in the SPD have already been tempted to side with the BSW in the name of peace, may some in the Union yet side with it over migration?

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<sup>1</sup> The source for the results in in the Landtagswahlen (state elections) in Thuringia and Saxony (1 Sep 24) and Brandenburg (22 Sep 24) is [election.de](#). For seats, including the number of Wahlkreise (constituencies) won, click on Thuringia's "[historie](#)" column.

<sup>2</sup> [Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk](#) 1 Sep 24, "[Both CDU and AfD claim Government mandate for themselves](#)" (\*). This asterisk signals that it's my English translation of the original German title. MDR is the public broadcaster for Thuringia and the two neighbouring states of Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.

<sup>3</sup> Background on the AfD is presented in the Anti-Defamation League's "[Alternative for Germany \(AfD\) Party: What You Need To Know](#)" (2 Jan 25). Deutsche Welle's report (13 May 24) "[Germany's domestic secret service battles far-right AfD](#)" covers what such a designation means for state surveillance of the AfD.

<sup>4</sup> For Höcke's use of banned Nazi slogans, see the Anti-Defamation League. His 39 per cent in the [Greiz II constituency](#) left him more than a thousand votes behind the winning CDU candidate Tischner. Tischner's constituency vote exceeded the CDU's party vote in Greiz II by more than 4,000.

<sup>5</sup> "[The German far-right's digital push: Analysing the AfD's campaign in Saxony and Thuringia](#)" (16 Sep 24) is a report of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Correctiv's article "[Secret plan against Germany](#)" (15 Jan 24), based on a report of a meeting in November 2023 attended by senior AfD figures, describes "re-migration" as the forced deportation from Germany of asylum seekers, non-Germans with residency rights, and "non-assimilated" German citizens.

<sup>6</sup> MDR, 3 Sep 24, "[What the AfD's blocking minority means for Thuringia](#)" (\*)

<sup>7</sup> A discussion of this in the context of Thuringia appeared in the Thüringer Allgemeine (TA), the regional daily paper (3 Nov 24) "[Power struggle over Thuringia: how centralist is the Wagenknecht party?](#)" (\*).

<sup>8</sup> The interview with Bodo Ramelow, conducted by [Jürgen Klute](#), editor of the Europe Blog, and me, took place on 22 October 2024. The material from the interview will form the basis of a future post.

<sup>9</sup> The clash between Wagenknecht and the Thuringia BSW, led by Katja Wolf, the long-serving former mayor of Eisenach, was covered by the TA, for example: (21 Oct 24) "[Thuringia pragmatism makes Wagenknecht's life difficult](#)" (\*); (1 Nov 24) "[One year of the BSW and already a crash – how the break between Wagenknecht and Wolf came about](#)" (\*); (4 Nov 24) "[Heated debate over unknown new party members](#)" (\*). When the three parties in Thuringia reached agreement, their chief negotiators, including Wolf, proclaimed it in a Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (10 Nov 24) opinion piece under the headline "[Pragmatismus statt Ideologie!](#)"

<sup>10</sup> Der Spiegel (14 Dec 24), p6: "Putin darf sich freuen".

<sup>11</sup> TA (11 Dec 24), "[Minister-President election: Die Linke and coalition reach agreement](#)" (\*); TA (13 Dec 24, 9.26am) "[Minister-President election live: new government in place](#)" (\*)