

The Bundestag Election 2025

II: Coalitions not winners: in Berlin, will Black-Red have the numbers?

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January 2025

[A two-party coalition may depend on the small parties just missing out](#)

“Who’s going to win?” is the most important question in an election decided by first-past-the-post because the winning party is likely able to form a new government on its own.

In Germany’s proportional electoral system, by contrast, the connection between the election result and the new government is much more tenuous. Although convention grants the winning party the right to try to form and lead a new government, it has to find a coalition partner. The most important question to ask of a German election is: which coalitions does it make possible?

Since any party in the Bundestag could be part of a coalition, the smaller parties’ vote shares matter too.

At the mid-point in the election campaign, the government that looks most likely to emerge is a coalition of the centre-right Union (CDU/CSU) and the centre-left SPD. Unthinkable in Britain, such a government in Germany would signify nothing more than a return of the “Grand” coalition that has ruled the country for 12 of the past 20 years.

As the opinion polls stand, this still uncertain outcome would be made more likely were the smaller parties to fall short – but only just so – of what they need to enter the Bundestag. There’s an irony here – a less representative parliament delivers a stronger government – and a danger, since what’s good for Black-Red is good for the AfD too.

The state of the opinions polls and the parties in the new Bundestag

Evidence of where the parties stand in the polls is based on six opinion polls conducted over the period 6 January to 23 January.¹ Based on their poll performance, the parties divide into two groups.

The first is made up of the four parties that are certain to secure representation in the Bundestag in proportion to their share of the popular vote. They are: the centre-right Union (the CDU and its sister party in Bavaria, the CSU) on 31%, the far-right AfD on 20%, the SPD on 16% and the Greens on 14%.

The second group contains the three parties that might or might not secure representation. They are: the left-wing BSW on 5%, the liberal FDP on 4% and the left-wing Die Linke on 3%. The other 7% goes to parties who are almost certain to end up with no representatives.² To secure proportional representation, a party must either get 5% the party vote or have three directly-elected constituency representatives.³

Depending on exactly how well the three smaller parties do, the new Bundestag could contain elected members from between four and seven parties.

While further big shifts in support for the larger parties would of course make a difference, so too could very small shifts in support for the smaller parties.

The new Bundestag and the viability of a Black-Red coalition

As the largest party, convention would grant the Union the right to lead the negotiations with other parties aimed at forming a coalition that can go on to govern.

In line with the commitment to the firewall around the AfD, observed by all the parties, a Union-AfD coalition is ruled out in advance. So what about a Union-SPD coalition? With a combined vote-share of 47%, would such a Black-Red coalition have a working majority?

The answer is: it all depends on how well the three smaller parties do and whether they clear the hurdle that secures them Bundestag seat in proportion to their vote.

A recent analysis suggests that the polls are pointing towards a Bundestag in which just the four bigger parties make it through.⁴ If that's what happens, the seats in the Bundestag will be divided among the four in proportion to their votes. With their combined support totalling 81% of all votes cast, a Black-Red coalition with 47% of all votes would have a comfortable parliamentary majority, because Black-Red's 47% is more than half of the four parties' 81%.

By contrast, all three of the three smaller parties do get through, the parliamentary picture looks quite different, Now, Bundestag seats would be divided among seven parties whose total vote share would add up to say 94%. In this situation, Black-Red's 47% gives it only half the seats. What was a comfortable majority with four parties all but vanishes if seven get in.

According to the latest polling, this could go either way. For both the FDP and the BSW, clearing the hurdle is all about getting 5%.⁵ Die Linke, by contrast, hopes to get there by

winning the three constituencies where its candidates are high profile, party members of long-standing.⁶

If Black-Red has too few seats, a third party would need to be added to the coalition. Three-party coalitions at the federal level in Germany are rare, the outgoing Red-Green-Yellow coalition being the first since 1957.⁷

Who might the third partner be? History points to the FDP, which has in fact served for longer in the federal government, as the junior partner, than either the Union or the SPD; in short, a Black-Red-Yellow coalition.⁸ Alternatively, the precedent represented by the coalition that took office in the state of Thuringia in December points to the third partner being the BSW: Black-Red-Purple coalition.⁹

At the state level too, with Black-Green and Green-Black coalitions ruling in two of Germany's three largest states, Black-Red-Green must be a possibility too. These two states, North-Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg, are home to a third of Germany's population.¹⁰

Although the opinion polls haven't moved much since an election, eight months ahead of schedule, first became certain, they have still moved a bit. When there is already so much uncertainty, moving a bit more could make a lot of difference. Compared with early December, just before the campaign began, polls show the AfD up 2%, the Greens up nearly 1% the SPD down 0.5% and the Union down nearly 1.5%.

If the polls move by the same amount again by the time of the election, all hope of a Black-Red majority in a seven-party Bundestag would vanish. All the three-party coalitions would still have a majority, although only Black-Red-Green would be numerically secure.¹¹

In short, even if a four-party Bundestag is the most likely outcome, a five-, six- or even-seven-party parliament is quite possible too.

The prospect of coalition influences the election itself

Outcomes like these, based on the Union's vote share slipping further, are not a prediction. But they are a possibility. That support for the Union would slide during the election campaign was the SPD's plan, the Greens' hope and the Union's fear. Rather more surprising is that the SPD vote share is going nowhere. It's that combination, of Black retreat and Red stagnation, that is now calling the parliamentary viability of a coalition between the two parties into question.

The prospects for coalition after the election also influence the election itself. With Black-Red signalled so strongly, both Union and SPD have an interest in the other one not doing too badly. While each obviously hopes to take votes from the other, they would also be quietly satisfied to see the other one gain votes from – or at least stop losing votes to – other parties.

Conclusion: how well the smaller parties do is the measure of democracy

Would it be better if only four parties succeed in winning proportional representation in the Bundestag? There are two reasons for thinking not.

One is to do with democratic legitimacy. In a seven-party Bundestag, Black-Red needs 47% of the popular vote in order to secure a majority of seats. In a four-party parliament (assuming that the three parties only just fall short), it could drop to 42% before its majority is gone. By contrast, the German government that entered office in 2021 had won just over half the popular vote.

A second problem is: what's good for the Union and the SPD is also good for the AfD (and indeed the Greens as the other party to make it through): in essence, the strength of each of these parties in the Bundestag exceeds the strength of their electoral support by almost a quarter.

One way in which this could really matter is that under the German constitution, certain decisions require a super-majority of two-thirds in order to pass. These include constitutional changes, but also, for example, the appointment of judges. If the AfD were to win a third of the seats in the Bundestag, it would be able on its own to block these decisions, giving it leverage that could not but undermine the firewall.

At the moment, the polls are nowhere near giving the AfD the level of support it would need to obtain this blocking minority. If support for the three small parties remain close to what they need to enter the Bundestag, the best insurance against the AfD doing so is for those smaller parties to make it through.

¹ The latest results from eight polling organisations are published in a consolidated table on wahlrecht.de. The ones used here are the six whose latest poll was conducted entirely in January. The six are: Allensbach, Forsa, Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Infratest dimap, INSA and YouGov. The numbers reported here are simply the average of the six.

² Although they may win a constituency representative, the FW ("Free Voters") are excluded here because few of the polls report results for them.

³ See the previous [blog post](#) for more discussion of this, including the way a German parliamentary election is really two elections in one, one for a constituency representative and another for a party. .

⁴ [Election.de](#) (17 Jan 25) "Aktuelle Prognose sieht nur vier Fraktionen im Bundestag"

⁵ The FDP recorded no constituency wins in the 2021 Bundestag election, while the BSW recorded none in the state parliamentary elections last year, the first such contests since its formation at the start of 2024.

⁶ So-called Mission Silberlocke (as in silver and locks).

⁷ Yellow for the FDP and green for the Greens. Referred to as the Ampel – traffic light – coalition.

⁸ Sometimes referred to as Deutschland, based on the flag.

⁹ Dubbed Brombeere – blackberry – this time the coalition colours have been mixed.

¹⁰ It should also be noted that a two party Black-Green coalition would have a majority in a four-party Bundestag.

¹¹ The forecast Black-Red seat share drops from a bare 50% now, to 47%. The seat share for the three-party coalitions that don't include the Greens drop from 55 to 53%. Only Black-Red-Green's 63% seat share is higher than the outgoing three-party coalition's 57% at the time it came into office..