

## The Bundestag Election 2025

# V: A bad result for the centre parties doesn't make it a good result for the AfD

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The myth of the AfD's "irresistible rise" is not supported by the election result. Germany's general election is not just a bad result for the centre-left SPD, its support down by a third at an all-time low. It's also a bad result for the centre-right Union, which lost support during the election campaign and whose gamble on pitching its tent on AfD ground did not remotely bring the electoral dividend it hoped for.

But a bad result for the centre parties was not that good a result for the AfD either, because although it is now the largest party in opposition to the likely new coalition, two other parties to the left are together numerically as strong as the AfD.

The danger is that the AfD's prominence, by virtue of being the leading party of opposition, allows an impression of the election to take hold that gives succour to the myth of the AfD's rise being inevitable. A fuller reading of the election result shows that impression to be wrong.

What is undeniable, however, is quite how numerically weak the likely new Black-Red coalition will be. Unlike 2013, this is no "grand" coalition of the two biggest parties dominating the Bundestag. And had Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW received the extra 13,000 votes it needed to reach the 5% hurdle and so enter the Bundestag, a two party Black-Red coalition would not even have had a majority.

## A bad result for the centre parties but a balanced Bundestag even so

Germany's general election delivered a terrible result for its centre-left SPD. Down more than a third on the last election in 2021, its 16.5% share of the vote was a record low for the party.

Less often said is how disappointing the result was for the centre-right Union too. Yes it came first, by a wide margin, but its 28.5% vote share was three points down on the start of the campaign and more than six points short of the "35%+" target reportedly set by the party leader, Friedrich Merz, in the run-up to the Bundestag debate on migration.<sup>1</sup>

The electoral weakness of these two parties certainly has spells difficulties for the new coalition government they are now trying to form.<sup>2</sup> Before starting to look at the new government, however, it is crucial to get a proper picture of the new Bundestag that the election has brought into being.

To one side of this picture is, indeed, the AfD. As the largest opposition party, the AfD will occupy a position in the Bundestag that brings it parliamentary privileges, not the least of which is the prominence that this will bring the party and those who speak for it.

But this prominence does not mean that the AfD is now the only part of the opposition that really counts; nor is it a sign that the election was a great success for the AfD; nor still that it is now poised to take power in 2029 – or sooner if the new government collapses before then.

For there is an opposite side to this picture too, occupied by the Greens and the left-wing Die Linke whose combined parliamentary strength is almost exactly equal to that of the AfD. The differences between these two parties isn't to be underplayed: they are not a cohesive force like the AfD. But they do provide a real counter-weight.

As a result, the new five-party Bundestag created by the election provides a more balanced picture of German discontent with its political centre than would the four party one that was long expected. What is vital is that it is seen that way, above all, by the two centre parties now engaged in the task of negotiating a coalition agreement.

## Instead of surging, support for the AfD hardly increased at all

Quoting Merz, the headline on the BBC's live reporting on election night was: "far-right AfD surge is warning for Germany's other parties".<sup>3</sup> There is a problem here and it's to do with the word "surge".

The AfD's 20.8% share of the vote, which moved it up to an historic second place, was double what it got in 2021. The key thing about this rise, however, is that it took place over an 18 month period which started in mid-2022 and had ended by early 2024. At its peak, opinion polls were giving the AfD 23% or 24%.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after, support fell back rapidly, to just below 20%, where it remained for the rest of the year. At least part of the reason for the reversal was the hostile reaction to the revelation that the AfD wasn't just going to restrict the flow of people into Germany, but was

toying with expelling people with a migrant background too, even if they had citizenship (so-called “re-migration”).<sup>5</sup>

In the early weeks of the election campaign, up to mid-January, support for the AfD started to rise again, back above 20 per cent.<sup>6</sup> From that point onwards, however, it made almost no further progress, leaving it several percentage points below its peak of a year earlier.

This is despite conditions that could hardly have been better for it: a weak and divided government; inflation, recession and war; a series of attacks committed by foreigners that played to its core message; a leader whose image did not fit the far-right stereotype and who was treated by the broadcasters as a serious contender for Chancellor; public expressions of support for the AfD by Musk and Vance.

Far from surging, support for the AfD over the last year is better described as flat-lining. Of course the possibility of it stepping up again by the next election cannot be dismissed. But on the basis of these numbers, it is at least as reasonable to believe it has missed its best chance.

### Support on the left splintered by there was no real lurch to the right

Although the share of the vote going to the SPD fell nine percentage points, the share for the SPD, Greens, Die Linke and BSW (which missed out on the Bundestag by just 13,000 votes) together fell by only three points. That drop is significant but it is small enough to refute the idea there was a lurch to the right. What did happen, however, was that the left vote splintered.

Judged against the goal of coming first, splintering is bad news. Back in 2021, when the SPD got five times as many votes as Die Linke, Scholz became Chancellor and the SPD led the coalition. This time, when its vote was less than double Die Linke’s, it slipped back to third.

The reason for Die Linke’s 8.8% vote share is no mystery. Starting the campaign on 3%, the party knew that parliamentary survival was at stake. Although its vote share did rise a bit as the campaign went on, its fortunes were transformed by a speech to the Bundestag made by its co-leader, Heidi Reichinnek, on the last day of January. In it, she called upon Friedrich Merz not just to apologise for having breached the firewall around the AfD, but to resign as the Union’s candidate for Chancellor.<sup>7</sup>

To pressurise Merz further, Reichinnek also called upon the Greens and SPD to announce that they would not serve in a coalition under his leadership.<sup>8</sup> The TikTok clip of her speech is said to have been viewed six million times.<sup>9</sup>

There are two things to remember here. First, Die Linke’s success was not down to some fiendish slogan unearthed from the archives of its East German Socialist Unity party ancestor.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the substance of Reichinnek’s criticisms of Merz were little different from those of the SPD or the Greens. What was different was the style: short, sharp and brooking no compromise.

Second, the surge in Die Linke's support was less a vote for than a vote against. Thanks to this surge (the right word here), Die Linke has 64 representatives in the new Bundestag. Instead of electoral oblivion, the party is left grappling with the problems of success, including what positions to take on the pressing matters of the day.

What its centre-left opponents have to grapple with, especially the SPD, is why so many voters opted for Die Linke. An article in Tagesspiegel offered one angle on this by pointing out that if the election had been confined to 18 to 24 year-olds, Reichinnek (or her co-lead candidate, Jan van Aken) would now be preparing to become Chancellor. For among voters in this age group, Die Linke came first with a 25% vote share. Among women, it received 33%.

In speculating on why Die Linke did so well among this age-group, Tagespiegel suggested that it reflected a demand that its concerns be taken seriously, disappointment with the outgoing Red-Yellow-Green coalition and a liking for clarity. It also pointed to differences, both within the age group and compared with the past. Back in 2021, the Greens won the largest share of 18 to 24s. In 2025, the AfD came second overall and first among men, 25% of whom voted for it.<sup>11</sup>

### **A five-party Bundestag gives German politics a different complexion**

Until shortly before the election, the most likely outcome was that Germany would end-up with a four-party Bundestag and a Black-Red (Union-SPD) or even a Black-Red-Green coalition government. Die Linke's success put paid to this – and it is not just the numbers that are different.

First, Die Linke's presence in the Bundestag undermines the AfD's claim to be the only party that stands opposed to how politics has been conducted up to now.

Second, together with the Greens' 85 representatives, Die Linke's 64 makes for a combined left opposition only three fewer than the AfD's 152.<sup>12</sup>

The AfD would like Germany to think that an heroic battle is now underway between the old governing parties standing for the past and the AfD standing for the future. A four-party Bundestag would have lent credence to this story by conveying the image of an AfD against the rest. The five-party Bundestag that has been elected undermines the story because the image it conveys, of two co-equal oppositions, deprives the AfD of its claim to be special. Instead, the future remains open and an open future is one to which the centre parties, too, can belong.

### **To defeat the AfD, the new coalition needs to look both ways**

A five party Bundestag can only play this role if the new centrist coalition acknowledges this reality and looks both ways.

By adopting the priority the AfD gives to migration, its language and its policy recommendations, Merz and the Union seem interested only in seeing what lies to their right. If it's true that Merz believed that taking this road after Aschaffenburg would restore the Union's electoral fortunes, the result itself has shown that belief to have been wrong.

If the new coalition is to escape from the far-right's spell, it falls upon the SPD to insist upon a broader view, which takes account of Germany's international and European obligations, its duties to migrants and asylum seekers – in short, the concerns and values of those people who voted to the left. If the SPD judged during the election campaign that it should play down such arguments as it sought to react to the terror attacks in Aschaffenburg, Magdeburg and Munich, the success of Die Linke suggests that an electoral price may have been paid.

### Conclusion: a balanced Bundestag but a weak government

The numerical weakness of the likely governing coalition is striking. When a Black-Red coalition was formed in 2013, Union and SPD held 504 of the 631 seats in the Bundestag. This time, holding just 328 out of 630 seats, it will be hostage even to quite small rebellions in its own ranks.

It could, however, have been worse. Had the BSW managed to reach the 5% threshold required to enter the Bundestag (instead of falling short by just 0.03%), Union and SPD would have been deprived of 18 seats, enough to wipe out their majority. Had that happened, three parties would have been needed to form a majority coalition.

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<sup>1</sup> Der Spiegel, 1 Feb 2025, p17: „35 Prozent plus – das ist die Zielmarke, die Merz mit seinem Migrationskurs intern als erreichbar ausgegeben hat“.

<sup>2</sup> Two in the sense of Union and SPD but really three, because the Union itself is an alliance between CDU and CSU. When it comes to coalition building, the fact that they are distinct parties makes a difference.

<sup>3</sup> BBC, 23 Feb 2025, "[Far-right AfD surge is warning for Germany's other parties, says winner Merz](#)"

<sup>4</sup> [YouGov](#), for example, had support for the AfD up from 12% in July 2022 to 24% in January 2024. Pollsters INSA and Forsa had it at 23%.

<sup>5</sup> As discussed in an [earlier blog](#), a report by Correctiv ("[Secret plan against Germany](#)", 15 Jan 24) into 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> In my mid-campaign poll average (see [here](#)), the AfD stood at 20.4%, up from 18.3% at the start of the campaign.

<sup>7</sup> Reichinnek, 31 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27537: „Ich erwarte nicht nur eine Entschuldigung von Ihnen, Herr Merz, wie Kollege Mützenich, ich erwarte, dass Sie als Kanzlerkandidat zurücktreten“.

<sup>8</sup> Reichinnek, 31 Jan 2025, Plenarprotokoll, p27538: „Der SPD und den Grünen sage ich deswegen ganz deutlich: Mit einer Union unter Merz könnt ihr nicht zusammenarbeiten, sagt das, weder vor der Wahl noch danach“.

<sup>9</sup> Tagesspiegel, 26 Feb 2025, p11

<sup>10</sup> East Germany's ruling party up until 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Tagesspiegel, 26 Feb 2025, p11: „So haben die Jungen abgestimmt: Fünf Lehren aus der Bundestagswahl“

<sup>12</sup> There is also one independent.