

The Bundestag Election 2025

IX: In Thuringia: public disenchantment with federal politics did not start in 2015

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Migration or levelling up? German disenchantment with federal politics runs deep

The day when Friedrich Merz's election to the Chancellorship – at the second attempt – brought Germany's new government into being, is a good time to ask whether the centrist politicians have even now really grasped how deep the challenge is that they face.

In prioritising the control of migration above all else, Merz and his centre-right colleagues believe their greatest challenge dates from 2015. This was when then Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed that Germany should admit around a million refugees from the war in Syria.

A political statistic about Thuringia dating back 35 years suggests this view may be too narrow and too recent. What the statistic measures is the level of public support within Thuringia for the four parties that have monopolised the government of the Federal Republic since the 1960s. The four are the centre right CDU, the centre-left SPD, the liberal FDP and the Greens. Each time this statistic has moved, it has done so in the same direction.

Thuringia, one of the six states that used to be part of East Germany, isn't large and may not be typical. But it does have a good claim to have been on Germany's leading edge in matters religious, cultural and political across the centuries.

If the disenchantment with the four federal parties runs as deep as this statistic suggests, it raises doubts about the prospects for the new government, constructed as it is on a narrower prospectus, even before it has begun.

Ever falling support for the four federal parties before the AfD was born

The statistic being used here is the percentage share of the whole electorate who cast their second votes for one of the four parties in Bundestag elections since 1990.¹

It should be stressed straightaway that this isn't how voting shares are usually expressed. In any particular election, what matters isn't the share of the whole electorate but the share of that part of it which turned out to vote. Those who don't vote don't count.

But when looking at results over time, those who don't vote this time could still vote next time. To gauge each party's true strength, those who didn't vote need to be taken into account. Measuring support as a share of the whole electorate is the way to do that.

Since 1990, there have been 10 Bundestag elections: every four years from 1990 to 2002 and, following an early end to the government elected in 2002, every four years from 2005 to 2025. Over this period, support for the four federal parties among Thuringia's electorate fell from 66% in 1990 to 28% in 2025.

The pattern of this decline is that of a series of steps down, to around 58% between 1994 and 2002, 51% in 2005, around 41% between 2009 and 2021, and then 28% in 2025.²

28% in 2025 is not just a matter of Thuringia being on the losing side "this time". Under the UK's first-past-the-post system, there are plenty of places where the governing party gets little support. It is very likely, though, that some time in the future the tables will be turned, leaving other places in the UK to put up with a government that few of them there want.

But that's not how it works in Germany. Not only has federal government been monopolised by these four but the coalition culture means that parties can remain in office for years on end, even after suffering a big defeat. The SPD, which has been in government for all but four of the past 27 years, has returned again in 2025, controlling several key ministries, despite the worst result in its history.³

2025's record low must not obscure the fact that support for the federal parties in Thuringia began to fall long ago. The 17% drop from 2002 to 2009 is just as important as the 13% drop this year. Years before the AfD was born, a majority of Thuringians were no longer voting for the federal four.

Falling turnout prepared the ground for a new political force

If you only look at the share of the vote – rather than the share of the electorate – you don't see this. Even as recently as 2013, the four federal parties were getting more than 60% of the votes cast in Thuringia in a Bundestag elections – and more than 50% even in 2021. The difference between the share of those vote and the share of the electorate, is turnout.

Turnout in Thuringia for Bundestag elections has usually been steady, within a point of 75% in 6 of the 10 elections. In 1998 and 2025, it topped 80%. By contrast, it dropped to 65% in 2009, and recovered only weakly to 68% in 2013. When 10% of the electorate suddenly stops

voting, as it did in 2009, it's a warning sign, disconnection from the electoral process creating a reservoir of disenchantment waiting to be tapped.

The first election contested by the AfD was 2013, the year it was formed. In Thuringia, it won the support of 4% of the electorate. Four years later, with turnout back to normal, it won 17%. Four years on again, in 2021, it won 18%; then in 2025, 31%. These numbers can't tell us where the AfD's support came from, but it certainly advanced (2013, 2017, 2025) when turnout rose. Not all of that was for the AfD; some is bound to have been against.

While it is bound to have won voters over directly from other parties, the reservoir of disaffected voters offered it an opportunity.

The CDU and CSU politicians at the top of this new government are convinced that the decision of their former Chancellor, Angela Merkel, to allow a million refugees from the Syrian civil war to enter Germany after 2015 is what fuelled the AfD's rise. Thuringia shows that this can only be part of the explanation. The AfD channelled the disenchantment that had emerged by 2009, but as the events believed to have fuelled the AfD's rise only came later, they cannot be its cause.

Might a failure to level up the East after unification have played a role?

What about a failure to "level up" properly after unification, to narrow the economic gap between the old East and the old West Germany? Might such a failure have played a part in the falling support for the federal parties in Thuringia, especially between 2001 and 2009?

Measured by its share of German GDP, there's no doubt that while economic activity in Thuringia took a huge step up in the early 1990s, it had stopped catching up with the rest of Germany by the middle of that decade. Since then, Thuringia's share of German GDP has held steady, well short, however, of its share of the German population. So while there was plenty of levelling-up to begin with, it ended a long time ago, leaving Thuringia's economy underweight, at least on a simple per capita basis.⁴

To see if there might be any link between the economics and politics, it is better to use something like household income which is more directly tangible than GDP. Just as with GDP, the period of really rapid growth is restricted to the first half of the 1990s, but unlike GDP, it carried on rising at a rate which is likely to be perceptible up to about 2000. Over that period, household income in Thuringia rose from 58% of the German average in 1991, to 76% in 1995 and 82% in 2000. Thereafter, there was very long period when the gap between Thuringian income and German income barely closed at all (82% still in 2005, 85% in 2010 and 2015). On the last numbers, for 2022, Thuringia is now up to 90%.⁵

We can really only guess at what this might have done for political support for the federal parties. If most of the levelling-up that's been done was accomplished in the 1990s, it may not be surprising that once that slowed almost to a halt after 2000, political support started to weaken. Yet that early progress was starting from a low base, a base which had entailed the destruction of a lot of the old East German economy, so the feelings even then would

have been mixed. If the later, much slower progress that narrowed the gap further (2005 to 2010 and 2015 to 2022) brought any political benefits, they may be undetectable beneath the rubble of other events including the financial crash in 2007 and the pandemic in 2020.

The only safe political conclusion here is that the only progress that pays off politically is rapid progress because only if it is rapid can it be felt. The only safe economic conclusion is that while there was a lot of levelling up in the 1990s, it stopped too soon.

This may not just be just a failure to see reunification through properly. Erfurt, Thuringia's capital, is served these days by newly built stretches of high-speed rail line, southward towards Munich, south-west towards Frankfurt and north-east towards Berlin. Reflecting its central location, that's about as good as anywhere in Germany. Yet because Germany lacks a dedicated high speed network, improvements like this remain fragmentary rather than transformational.

Conclusion: two dangers for the new government

There are two dangers for the new federal government here. The first is that it mistakes the way the AfD successfully channelled the disenchantment that it found after 2013, using migration, for the cause of that disenchantment, which dates at the latest from the mid-2000s.

The second is that, while the economic transition that took place after unification looks like it fell well short, adding further fragments to the fragments already there, or small and steady change that is not appreciable in the everyday, mayn't change many minds.

¹ A reminder: Germans get two votes, one for a constituency representative and the second for a party, with this, the second, being what's used to create a parliament that's proportional.

² Source: Wahlen im Freistaat Thüringen: [1990 to 2021](#) and [2025](#)

³ The number voting for the SPD in Thuringia this year was down 60% on 2021.

⁴ As a share of Germany's GDP, Thuringia's share rose from 1% in 1990 to 1.8% in 1994 – but no further catch-up since. This compares with a population share for Thuringia in 2023 of 2.5%. Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis): GDP [Germany \(code 82111-0001\)](#) and [Länder \(code 82111-0010\)](#); [Population by Land \(code 12411-0010\)](#)

⁵ Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis): Household income per head. [Germany \(code 82411-0001\)](#) and [Thüringen \(code 82411-0010\)](#)