

German centrist politics in crisis: the 2026 Landtag elections

**IV: Into the unknown:
after the election in Sachsen-Anhalt**

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After the state parliamentary election in Sachsen-Anhalt, 6 September 2026

As the opinion polls foretold, so it has come to pass: in the election for their new state parliament, voters in Sachsen-Anhalt didn't just put the AfD first, but have put it so far in front that it is almost able to form a majority state government all on its own; almost, but not quite.

Had it been able to do so, the keystone of the federal German governing tradition dating back to 1949, that government should mean government by coalition, would have come crashing to the ground.

Having just failed to do so, a void has opened up. The rule of thumb, that on the road to a new German government, the election itself is only halfway – this still holds. But the terms on which this new government is formed, if at all, and how the political parties get there – this is unknown terrain.

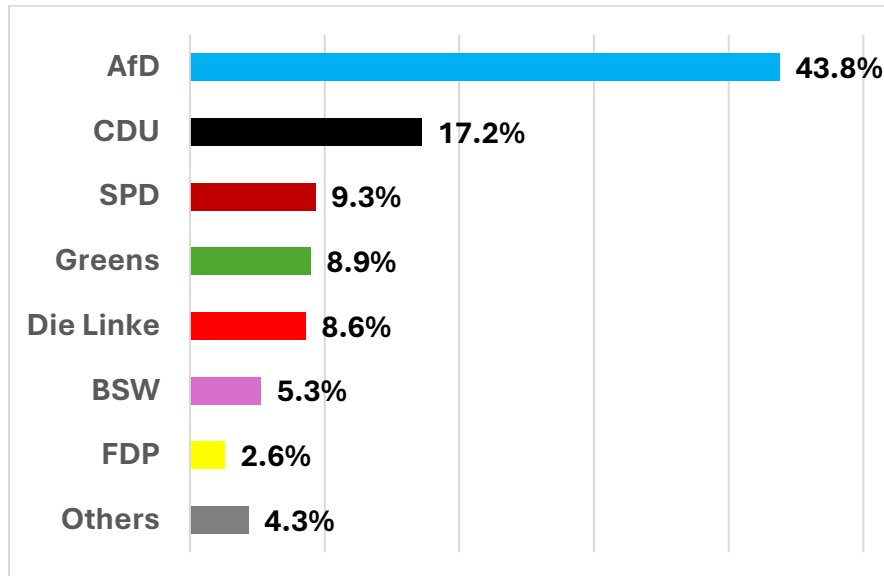
This post explains how did the AfD do so well, suggests why it did so well, and considers what may happen next. The key point here is: while the AfD has secured a huge advantage, it has not yet won.

Certainly, the parties of the centre – above all the CDU as the leading force among them in the state – have lost control, leaving the AfD with the freedom to form a coalition with whoever it can persuade to work with it. In the federal governing tradition, there can be no greater electoral prize.

But whether this is really the prize that the AfD seeks isn't clear; nor whether the party itself is of one mind on the matter. Having seized the initiative, the AfD now has to start showing its hand.

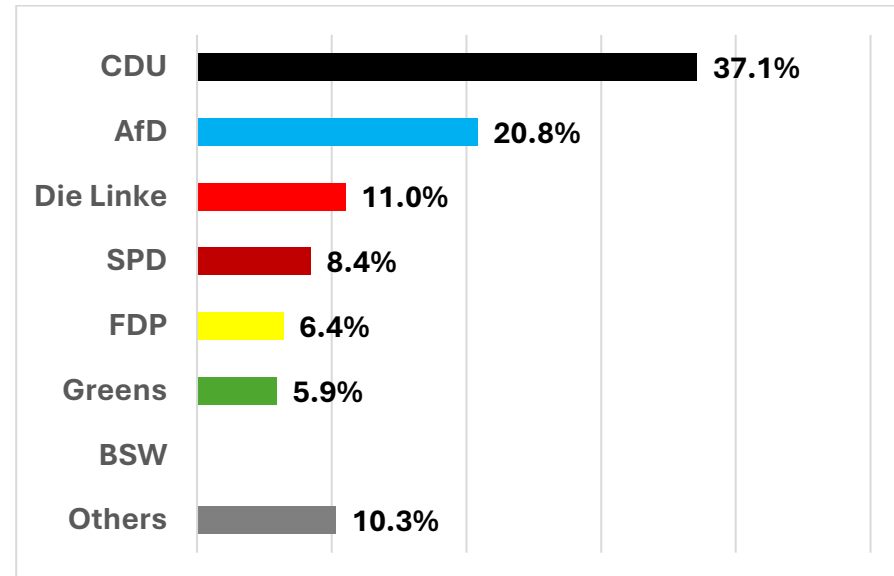
The election result: votes, share by party, and turnout, 2026 and 2021

Share of second round votes, 2026



- Four centre parties' share combined: 38%
- Turnout: 78%
- Valid 2nd round votes: 1.32 million

Share of second round votes, 2021



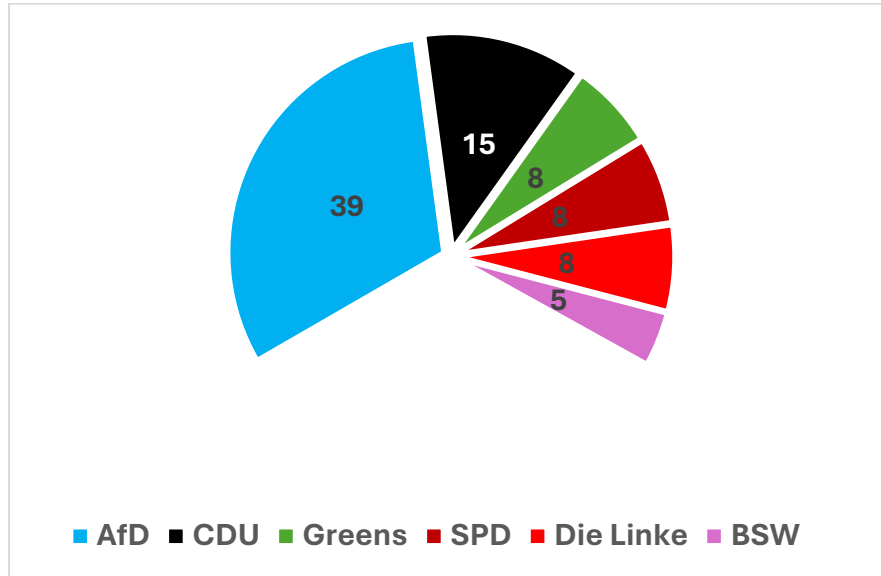
- Four centre parties' share combined: 58%
- Turnout: 60%
- Valid 2nd round votes: 1.06 million

Gaining more than double the share of a higher turnout, the AfD's vote rose 350,000 to almost 580,000

- Gaining only 38% between them, the CDU/SPD/FDP/Greens have lost control, leaving the initiative with the AfD

The election result: parliamentary seats by party, and possible governments

Landtag seats by party (42 for a majority), 2026



A majority AfD government

- The AfD would need at least three MPs from other parties to join it, perhaps informally, by forming a new parliamentary grouping

A majority coalition government

- The AfD could form a majority coalition with any party that would work with it – but only the BSW is even willing to talk with it
- An anti-AfD coalition is numerically possible – but the CDU won't work with Die Linke nor the BSW with the CDU

A minority coalition government

- Comes into being if MPs from other parties allow a Minister-President to be elected
- Three non-AfD MPs would need to vote for an AfD Minister-President, in a secret ballot
- Six non-AfD MPs would need to abstain for an AfD Minister President to be elected, once a simple majority becomes sufficient

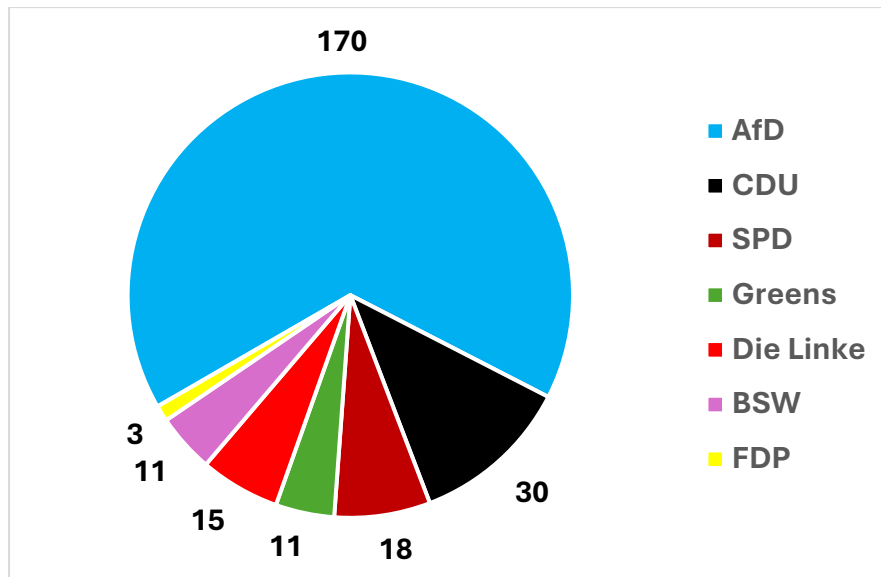
Were any other party so far ahead, it would now be looking to forge a coalition through negotiation

- But with the AfD, it isn't clear if it even wants to negotiate, or indeed govern without a majority

The swing to the AfD: where the extra 350,000 votes won in 2026 came from

Based on exit-poll research, published by the broadcaster ARD's Tagesschau (Daily Show)

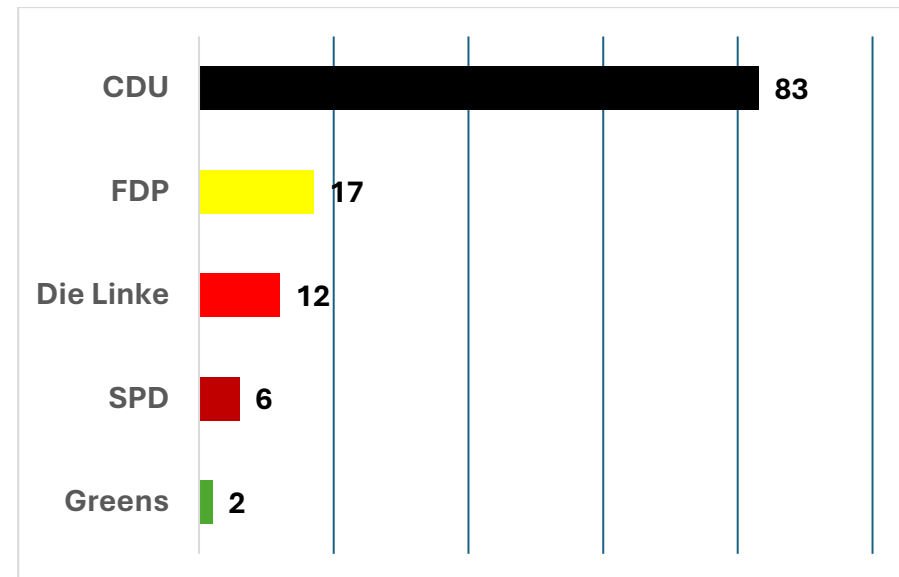
2021 non-voters: votes by party, 2026 (000s)



The former non-voters

- Of the 260,000 people who didn't vote in 2021 but did in 2026, two-thirds voted AfD

2021 voters by party: AfD switchers 2026 (000s)



The switchers

- Of the 120,000 people who didn't vote AfD in 2021 but did in 2026, 100,000 switched from CDU or FDP (about 20% of their 2021 votes)

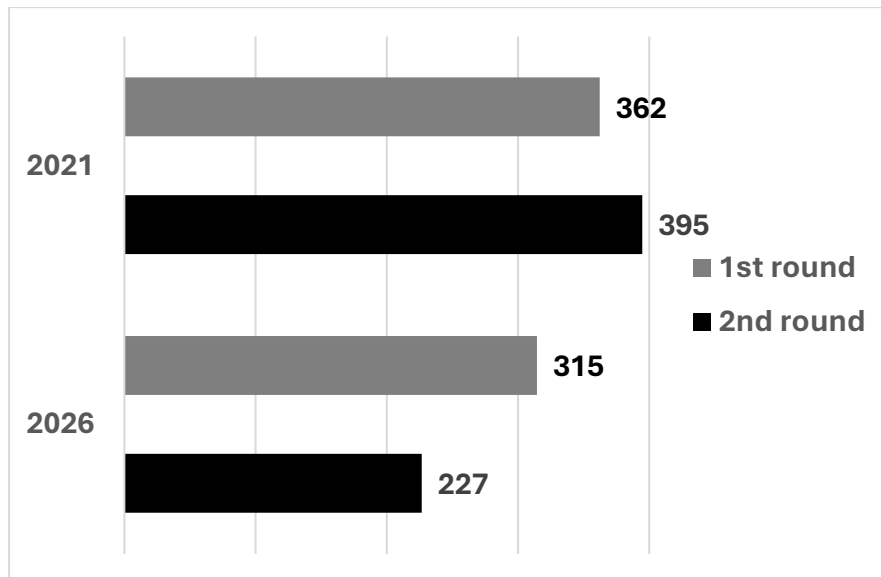
As estimates, these numbers are only approximate, but as the pattern is clear, it's likely robust

- Half the AfD's extra voters didn't vote in 2021; most of the others voted CDU or FDP in 2021

The swing against the CDU: where the 170,000 second round votes lost in 2026 went

The second round vote shapes the parliamentary outcome – but can mislead about a party's support

CDU: 1st and 2nd round votes: 2021, 2026 (000s)



- Between 2021 and 2026, the CDU's first round vote fell by under 50,000, even as its second round vote fell by almost 170,000

- 315,000 first round votes gave the CDU 24% of the vote – up a bit on the final opinion polls

Different tactical priorities in 2021 and 2026

- Different tactical priorities for centrist voters account for the different first-to-second round shifts in 2021 and 2026
- Battling the AfD for first place in 2021, the CDU picked up 33,000 more votes in round two; other centre parties, mainly the SPD, shed 27,000
- With no chance of first in 2026, the CDU shed 88,000 votes in round two; other centre parties, mainly the Greens, picked up 84,000 – helping it cross the 5% threshold

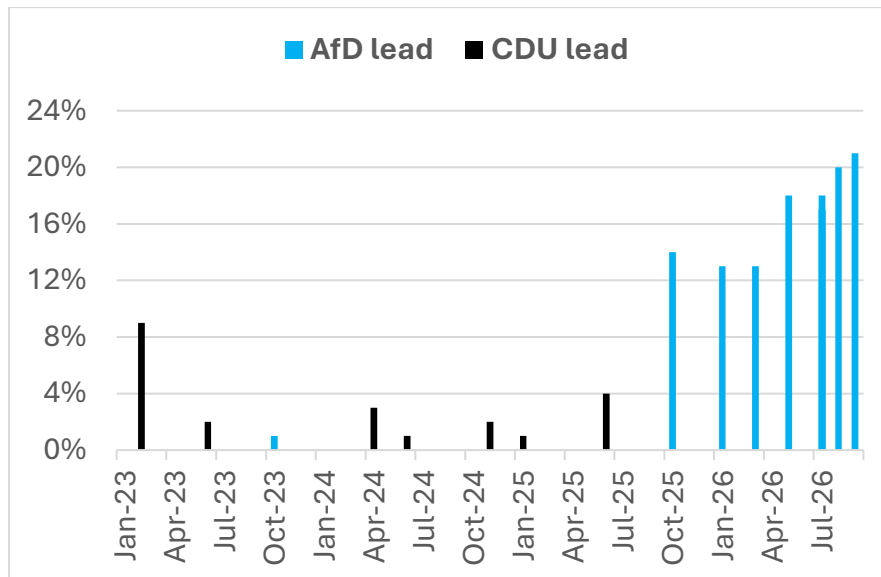
Tactical voting to thwart the AfD helped the CDU's second round vote in 2021 – and harmed it in 2026

- But tactical voting between centre parties can't change their combined share

The swing to the AfD, when and why: Sachsen-Anhalt itself

In the 2021 Landtag election, the CDU led the AfD by 12% in the first round and 16% in the second

Opinion poll lead: CDU or AfD? 2023-26



Period 1 (February 23 to June 25): CDU holds on

- The first post-election poll (Feb 23) put the CDU ahead by 9%

Two political developments in Sachsen-Anhalt, in May and August 2025, contributed to the AfD surge

- The AfD chose Markus Siegmund as its lead candidate for the 2026 Landtag election
- Reiner Haselhoff, CDU Minister President since 2011, said he would step down before the election

- Six of the next seven polls, to June 25, still had it ahead, by between 1% and 4%

Period 2 (June 25 to March 26): AfD takes over

- The poll in October 25 put the AfD 14% ahead; no such surge can be seen in opinion polls nationwide or in next-door states
- Two polls, either side of the February 2025 general election, showed the AfD lead steady

Period 3 (Mar 26 to Sep 26): AfD jumps again

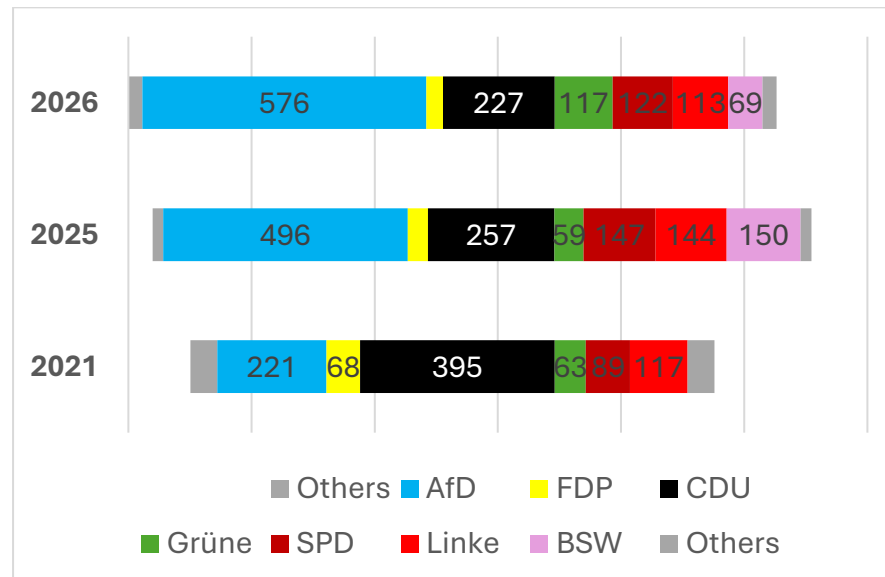
- The AfD lead rose again, to 18% (May 26) and then to 20%; this jump in AfD support, during spring 26, is in line with national trends

The swing to the AfD, when and why: the federal level

Comparing the Landtag election with its predecessor misses the role of the 2025 Bundestag election

Sachsen-Anhalt elections, second round votes:

2021 (Land), 2025 (Bund), 2026 (Land), 000s



- Any party “spectrum” is always arguable; the Black-Green boundaries are aligned here to serve as a proxy for the political mid-point

If the Landtag result is a political “earthquake”, Sachsen-Anhalt’s Bundestag result gave due warning

- Most of those who voted AfD for the Landtag had already voted AfD for the Bundestag

What the Bundestag result adds to the story

- Although a quarter more people voted in 2026 (1.32m) than 2021 (1.06m), slightly more still had voted in 2025 (1.34m)
- The low (38%) vote share for the four centre parties in 2026 was foreshadowed in 2025
- Of the 350,000 who voted AfD in 2026 but not 2021, three-quarters had voted AfD in 2025
- Of the 170,000 who had voted CDU in 2021 but not 2026, more than three-quarters had not voted CDU in 2025
- Compared with 2021, before it existed, the BSW gained 69,000 votes in 2026; compared with 2025, at its most popular, it lost 81,000 – prompting the question of where they went

What next? Sachsen-Anhalt's new Landtag and its possible new governments

The new Landtag will first sit on 6 October when the election of a new Landtag “Speaker” will show whether the opposition to the AfD has any capacity to unite.

Possible new governments

There appear to be four possible outcomes to the negotiations and manoeuvring that will likely go on for several weeks beyond 6 October. The four, and what it would take for them to happen, are:

1. A majority AfD government: three (or more) non-AfD Landtag members must either join the AfD or resign their party and set themselves as independents committed to working with the AfD.
2. An AfD-led majority coalition government: the AfD and one other party must agree to co-operate.
3. A minority AfD government: three non-AfD Landtag members must vote for the AfD's Ulrich Sigmund as Ministerpräsident in a secret ballot, or at least six such members must abstain in a third ballot when Sigmund would only need a simple majority of those voting.
4. Dissolution of the Landtag and a fresh election: three non AfD members vote with the AfD to bring that about.

Sigmund campaigned for a majority AfD government: option 1 is therefore surely his first choice

- If option 1 fails, option 3 (minority AfD government) – looks the most likely outcome – but only if the AfD is willing to countenance it; national and state AfD leaders may take a different view on this.

What next? Uncharted territory

The initiative now lies with the AfD – but it remains hemmed in

The AfD neither sees itself – nor is seen (and treated) by other parties – as a normal political party participating in the now nearly 80 year old Federal German tradition of government by coalition.

If it is unable to escape that tradition – by forcing a majority AfD government into being – the AfD must now choose: will it accept the constraints and still try to govern, or will it refuse?

“Accepting the constraints” would also require some individual Landtag members or a party – the BSW is the only possibility – to allow (“tolerate”) Sigmund to succeed in a bid to be Ministerpresident.

The centre parties together have suffered an historic defeat – for the second time in 18 months

The main reason why the Sachsen-Anhalt result opens onto uncharted territory is that with just 38% of the vote in both the first and second rounds, the four centre parties have lost control. This result is not a surprise: 38% was their share of the Sachsen-Anhalt vote in the 2025 Bundestag election.

The CDU is paralysed

On the numbers, the centre parties could try to form a minority anti-AfD government with the help of Die Linke – but the CDU in Sachsen-Anhalt won’t do this for fear of losing further support to its right.

Hoping that AfD voters will either turn (or return) to the CDU - or at least stay at home - when they see what the AfD is really like, is to leave the initiative with the AfD instead of trying to wrest it from it.

Sources and notes

Pages 2 and 3

- 2026 Landtag election [provisional results](#) and 2021 Landtag election [final results](#) (Sachsen-Anhalt government)

Pages 4 and 5

- Poll research data extracted manually from the presentation given by [Tagesschau](#), using data collected and analysed by the poll research company infratest dimap.
- Lacking access (so far) to the underlying data, certain things remain unclear, including the treatment of voters too young to vote in 2021 (as well as those who voted in 2021 but now deceased) and whether these estimates “fit” to the first round votes or the second. Given the symmetry (apart from the sign) of the transfers shown party by party, assume that these are net transfers rather than gross
- The 50,000 by which the first round CDU vote fell (page 5, bullet at bottom of left-hand column) happens to align with estimated (per Tagesschau) 83,000 former CDU voters lost to the AfD, offset by the estimated 30,000 former non-voters who voted CDU

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- The Sachsen-Anhalt opinion polls, from February 2023, are only those conducted by INSA (being the one poll company to have undertaken these polls on a regular basis over several years). The source is [Wahlrecht.de](#)

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- 2025 Bundestag [results](#) for Sachsen-Anhalt (Die Bundeswahlleiterin)

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Sachsen-Anhalt :Landtag, „[Konstituierung findet am 6. Oktober statt](#)“