

The 2021 German federal election in a nutshell

WHEN

On Sunday, 26 September 2021, the Federal Republic of Germany held its quadrennial federal elections.

WHY

To directly determine the 598 plus overhang seats of the Federal Parliament (Bundestag), and indirectly to choose the next Chancellor, since the newly-elected Bundestag provides a confidence vote to Germany's Chancellor and to his/her Government.

WHO

Some 60,4 million voters (18+) were eligible to vote. The turnout of this year's election was [76.6%](#).

1. [SPD- Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands](#) (25,7%, 206 seats)
The Social Democratic Party is regarded as the oldest political party in the country. It was established in 1890 after the Social Democratic Workers' Party and the General German Workers' Association (ADAV) merged into the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (SAP) that was renamed to SPD. It's a centre-left, pro-EU party. Since 2013 it has been the "junior" partner in the Grand Coalition, formed by CDU/CSU and SPD. [Olaf Scholz](#) is the nominated chancellor candidate.
2. [CDU- Christlich Demokratische Union](#) (24,1%, 196 seats with CSU)
The Christian Democratic Union is a centre-right, liberal-conservative, pro-EU party that operates in 15 out of 16 federal states in Germany. The appointed candidate for the chancellorship is [Armin Laschet](#), following the resignation of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer from the leadership of the party.
3. [CSU- Christlich-Soziale Union](#) (24,1%, 196 seats with CDU)
The Christian Social Union is the Bavarian sister-party of CDU. It's a right-wing party that leans more to conservatism and regionalism. With the CDU they form the so-called "[Union](#)".
4. [Bündnis 90/Die Grünen](#) (14,8%, 118 seats)
The Greens are a pro-EU party with roots in the pacifist movement of the 1960s, the environmentalist movement of the 1970s, and the peace movement of the 1980s. The party particularly focuses on tackling climate change, but it also articulates clear social and economic policies that complement their focus on green politics. [Annalena Baerbock](#) is the chosen chancellor candidate.
5. [FDP- Freie Demokraten Partei](#) (11,5%, 92 seats)
The Free Democratic Party is a centre-right, liberal-conservative party that was established in 1948 and for many years it held a position as junior party either with the CDU/CSU coalition (1949-1956, 1961-1966, 1982-1998 and 2009-2013) or with SPD (1969-1982). In 2013 it failed to win any seats.
6. [AfD- Alternative für Deutschland](#) (10,3%, 83 seats)
The Alternative for Germany is a relatively newly established party, as it was formed in 2013 by former CDU members opposing the Eurozone politics. It is a far-right, nationalist, anti-EU party, with strong anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, xenophobic, and racist agenda.
7. [Die Linke](#) (4,9%, 39 seats)

The Left is a left-wing party that emerged in 2007, after PDS, the democratic successor to the GDR SED party, and the left-wing WASG (part of the SPD in the old federal states), merged. The party is pro-EU, but calls for a fundamental transformation of the Union, anti-NATO, and stands for democratic socialism.

8. [Südschleswigscher Wählerverband](#) (0,1%, 1 seat)

The Voters' Union of South Schleswig is representing the Danish and the Frisian Minority in South Schleswig. It claims to be inspired by the Scandinavian political culture, which is particularly noticeable in areas such as social policy, environmental questions and educational policy, and stands for a decentralised policy like in Scandinavia.

* The percentages mentioned are according to the preliminary results for the 2021 Federal Elections in Germany.

[Source: The Federal Returning Officer](#)

HOW

Germany has a specific mixed proportional representation system. The Bundestag has at least 598 seats, despite the fact that the territory is divided into 16 federal states and 299 constituencies. The candidate that wins most votes in a constituency secures a seat in the Federal Parliament (299 seats). In addition to those seats, the Federal Parliament has what is called "overhang" and "balance seats", or simply extra seats. This is because every citizen has two votes; the first is used to cast a direct vote for a MP in one's constituency (left side of the ballot), and the second vote is for a political party (right side of the ballot). The order of the parties on the ballot paper is based on their performance in the last federal election. The vote is cast in the polling stations, but if one does not wish to go in person, they may exercise their right to vote by post.

For a party to qualify for a seat it needs to reach the threshold of 5% of the second votes in a state. But this rule comes, of course, with exceptions and this year we witnessed them twice. Two parties were exempt from the 5% threshold for representation in the Bundestag:

- a) the Südschleswigscher Wählerverband (Voters' Union of South Schleswig), and
- b) die Linke (the Left).

The first received 0.1% of the overall vote, and made it into parliament for the first time in about 70 years because it represents a national minority. The second one almost reached the threshold with 4.9% of the votes but still made it to the Federal Parliament after winning three constituencies.

For a candidate to be elected as Germany's Chancellor the absolute majority, i.e. more than half of the votes in Parliament, is needed (the absolute majority threshold for this year's Bundestag is 368 out of 735). But to proceed to this voting, the forming of a coalition (if a single political party doesn't reach absolute majority) must first take place. It is usually the coalition party that holds the most seats in the coalition that indicates the Chancellor to be voted for. Negotiations for the formation of a coalition are not conducted by the President

of the German Republic under a protocol and strict deadlines, but freely by the parties themselves.

The 2021 German Federal elections results led to 735 Bundestag seats that are occupied by representatives of 7 political parties:

- ◆ 206- SPD (+53)
- ◆ 196- CDU/CSU (-50)
- ◆ 118-Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (+51)
- ◆ 92- FDP (+12)
- ◆ 83- AfD (-11)
- ◆ 39- Die Linke (-30)
- ◆ 1-Südschleswigscher Wählerverband (+1)

The first transgender women to win a seat at the 2021 Bundestag, Tessa Ganserer and Nyke Slawik, stood for the Greens party.

WHAT (to anticipate)

According to the latest polls, but also based on the recent German elections' history, it is very unlikely for a single political party to emerge with an absolute majority¹. And the 2021 elections were not an exception. This election race came with a narrow winner, SPD, with 25,7% (1,6% point over CDU/CSU). Both the SPD and the CDU/CSU expressed their will to lead the next German government, with the SPD Chancellorship candidate, Olaf Scholz, making himself clear when stating that he wishes for the coalition talks to conclude before Christmas. But no matter what every Chancellorship candidate or party leader wishes, one thing is pretty clear. A long, tortuous, and unpredictable period of negotiations is expected to follow. And one thing is almost sure to happen: this election will probably lead for the second time the Greens in a federal government coalition.

At the beginning of the year, it seemed as though the Greens could take the lead, [according to the polls](#). But Annalena Baerbock's (the Green's candidate for Chancellor) approval rating went downhill after a number of [allegations undermined her credibility](#). In the summer, and as the CDU gradually approached 30% in the opinion polls, the party's candidate for Chancellorship, [Armin Laschet, failed to rise to the occasion of the severe floods in Germany, and faced harsh criticism](#) that led to even lower than the already low percentages of approval of his candidacy. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the CDU/CSU lost 8,8% points and landed on a historic low at 24,1% ([with the polls before the elections giving the party a 22%](#)). The above appears to have paved the way for an initially unlikely winner, [Olaf Scholz](#), SPD's candidate for Chancellor. His experience as Finance Minister and vice-Chancellor, along with his response to the crisis following the floods, seems to have put the [Chancellorship in reach for him](#). From the heated debate of Sunday 12 September 2021 emerged Olaf Scholz as the clear victor ([41% of the audience found him more convincing than the other two candidates](#)). [Annalena Baerbock](#) won the vote for the most likable one, and [Armin Laschet only](#) took the lead as the most suitable Chancellor among the Union questioned supporters. But it is not only the SPD's candidate for the Chancellorship that

¹ Konrad Adenauer, who governed with an absolute majority after the 1957 elections, is the single exception to the rule that has post-war Germany ruled by coalitions.

seems to have outperformed his co-candidates; it's also [the party itself that managed to catch up and took a surprise lead in the polls](#) (the last polls were projecting 25% for the SPD, which eventually won with 25,7%). As to the smaller parties, the far-right AfD has been scoring a solid [11-12% in the polls](#) but received 10,3% of the vote, while monopolizing the social media discourse and political campaign; the FDP that was expected to gain a bit and reach [13%](#), scored 11,5% (only 0,8% over its 2017 percentage). Finally, the polls didn't predict the big loss endured by Die Linke that was expected to lose 3 percentage units from its 2017 elections' score and to fall to around 6%, but eventually didn't even reach the 5% threshold.

The 2021 German Federal elections preliminary results

<u>2021</u>		<u>2017</u>	
25.7%	SPD	20.5%	+5,2%
24.1%	CDU/CSU	32.9%	-8.8%
14.8%	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	8.9%	+5.9%
11.5%	FDP	10.7%	+0.8%
10.3%	AfD	12.6%	-2.3%
4.9%	Die Linke	9.2%	-4.3%
0.1%	SSW	-	-
8.6%	Other	5%	+3.6%

Source: The Federal Returning Officer

Following the 26 September 2021 election results, a government coalition will need to be formed. Which one still remains hard to tell. Yet, the most likely scenarios are the following: "Traffic lights", "Kenya", "Germany", or "Jamaica":

- SPD-Greens-FDP ("Traffic Lights"). This is a tricky three-party coalition that will have to find its balance between green politics, social justice, and the modernization of the national economy. With the FDP willing to get back in power, we might see some surprises here. Should this coalition be reached, it will occupy 416 out of the 735 seats at the Bundestag.
- SPD-CDU/CSU-Greens ("Kenya"). This combination hasn't been tested and it is difficult to project which course it could follow. It could also be seen as a continuation of the GroKo (the "big coalition" between the CDU/CSU and the SPD), but with not a lot of place to maneuver. Should it take place, it will concentrate 520 out of the 735 seats and will definitely have a strong mandate to govern.
- CDU/CSU-SPD-FDP ("Germany"). This combination will reach over the 50% threshold in the Bundestag (494 out of 735 seats). But it is still hard to predict the path such a government will go down to. Also, it is the closest alternative to the current status, and therefore, unlikely to happen.
- CDU/CSU-FDP-Greens ("Jamaica"). This is a well-reheard coalition in many federal states. Should this scenario come true, it is expected to lead to a similar to the existing government, but a bit "greener". With 406 out of 735 seats, this might not be that strong of a coalition to lead Germany for the next four years.

On top of the above, two more coalitions were on the table. The first one is known under the name “Kiwis” that is used to describe the CDU/CSU-Greens coalition, but became quite unlikely even before the elections’ outcome, given the downwards percentage that the CDU/CSU Union presented in the polls. The second one was the SPD-Greens-Die Linke coalition, which currently finds application in the state of Thuringia. This possibility received harsh criticism by the centre-right parties in order to get more voters back into their fold. Both these scenarios apply no more since they do not reach an absolute majority of the seats in the Bundestag.

N.B. This is an informational paper in light of the upcoming e-Conference “The German Federal Elections: A Signpost for Germany, the EU, and Greece”, co-organized by the [Center for Research on Democracy and Law \(CEDLAW\)](#) at the [University of Macedonia](#) (Thessaloniki, Greece), and the [Heinrich Böll Stiftung Greece-Thessaloniki Office](#). The presented information does not necessarily reflect the positions of the two institutions.

For this informational paper general data were collected from the following sources:

<https://www.deutschland.de/en/2021-bundestag-elections>

<https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundeswahlleiter.html>

<https://www.dw.com/en/top-stories/german-election/s-100649>

<https://www.politico.eu/germany-election-2021/>

<https://www.economist.com/german-election-2021>

<https://graphics.reuters.com/GERMANY-ELECTION/POLLS/jnpweekxypw/>

<https://www.gesis.org/en/elections-home/german-federal-elections>

<https://pollytix.eu/pollytix-german-election-trend/>

<https://ecfr.eu/topic/german-election-2021/>