

GERMANY VOTES 2025



Volume 13: *Three Days Ahead of the Election – Final Verdict?*



Welcome to the 13th Volume of Germany Votes 2025!

It's the final countdown! With just days to go until election day and one third of the voter base still undecided, speculations are flaring up: who will govern with whom? In our exclusive mini-interviews, top politicians share their priorities for a coalition agreement and we speak with POLITICO journalist Rixa Fürsen. Meanwhile the Munich Security Conference has dominated the campaign trails for a few days questioning the transatlantic partnership and Germany's role in Europe's defense ramp up. We also look at final campaign moments, the timeline and examine the "invisible wall" in Germany shaping this election. Stay tuned!

Best,

Caroline Mücke-Kemp

Head of Public & Government Affairs Germany

As of 20 February 2025

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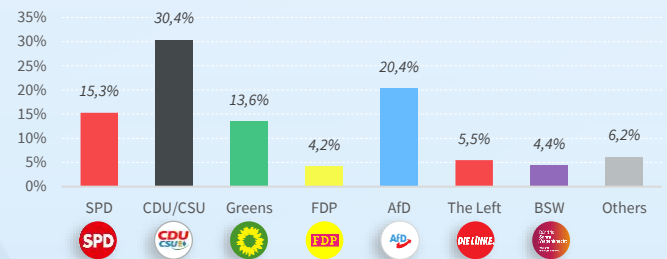
Days left until German
Federal Election on
23 February 2025

In a nutshell:

- **Coalition options:** Who will govern Germany?
- **Munich Security Conference:** A pivotal moment for the transatlantic defense partnership, bringing security policy to the forefront in Europe. What does this mean for the German election?
- **FTI-exclusive mini-interviews:** Top politicians on their priorities for the next coalition agreement.
- **Retrospective:** Timeline of early elections, top topics and an assessment of each party's campaign.
- **FTI-exclusive interviews:** POLITICO Berlin's Rixa Fürsen and Merle Spellerberg (Greens), MP and member of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, share their outlook on the election.
- **Deep Dive:** 35 years after reunification, Germany's deep east-west divide remains visible in the predicted election outcome map of the country's constituencies.

If Germans voted today, ...

... the CDU/CSU could choose a coalition with the SPD or with the Greens. CDU/CSU leader Friedrich Merz would most likely be the next Chancellor.



Source: FAZ, 20 February 2025

Person of the Week

Friedrich Merz

CDU/CSU Chancellor Candidate

One week before the election, Merz leads the race for Chancellor. He rejects an AfD coalition, despite a recent CDU/CSU anti-migration resolution passing with its support. While open to the SPD or Greens, he faces internal resistance to the latter.



“ Mr. Söder doesn't dictate anything to me. ”



Three Days Ahead of the Election: What Coalition Can Be Expected?

Political Landscape and Election Dynamics in Germany

Despite intense debates over migration policy, protests against the CDU/CSU for alleged ties to the AfD, and economic struggles, opinion polls remain largely unchanged. Many voters are dissatisfied with the federal government but also blame former Chancellor Angela Merkel for ongoing issues. CDU/CSU's chancellor candidate, Friedrich Merz, has struggled to expand his appeal beyond core supporters. With over a third of voters undecided, campaign strategists remain on edge.



5%

Challenges for Smaller Parties

Die Linke, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), and the FDP struggle to clear the 5% threshold needed to enter parliament. Higher turnout would force them to mobilize even more voters. If they enter, a fragmented Bundestag further complicates coalition-building.



Possible Coalition Scenarios

The CDU/CSU prefers a two-party coalition with the SPD but may face significant concessions if this is the only viable option. If they can also negotiate with the Greens, their leverage improves. However, current polls indicate that a three-party coalition may be necessary for a parliamentary majority.



The AfD Factor and CDU/CSU Strategy

Merz has ruled out cooperation with the AfD, calling votes for them "wasted." This strategy aims at attracting potential AfD voters to the CDU/CSU, strengthening its influence in coalition talks.

Key Policy Issues

The CDU/CSU, SPD, and Greens acknowledge that neglecting migration, economic, and security issues could further strengthen the AfD. This pressure may drive SPD and Green leaders toward policy compromises.



Key Negotiators

Tensions between party leaders could impede coalition talks, with harsh campaign rhetoric complicating trust-building. It remains uncertain whether exploratory talks will proceed smoothly. Key negotiators include Merz, Thorsten Frei, and Carsten Linnemann for the CDU; Lars Klingbeil, Rolf Mützenich, and Boris Pistorius for the SPD; and Markus Söder and Alexander Dobrindt for the Bavarian CSU.





New Sheriff, Same War(s): Setting the Scene for the New Federal Government

Last weekend's Munich Security Conference (MSC) set the stage for the new federal government's foreign policy, highlighting the pressing geostrategic challenges for Germany and Europe.

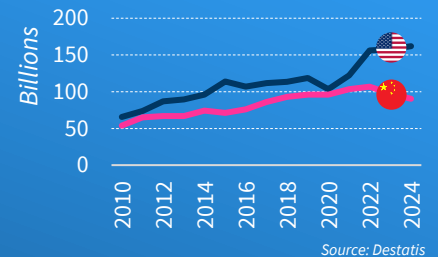
Fractures in the Western Alliance

U.S. Vice President Vance avoided proposing solutions for the Ukraine war and opted to criticize Europe instead. The U.S. delegation stressed its role in brokering peace, leaving Europe to maintain it. Meanwhile, the U.S. is shifting to a transactional foreign policy and withdraws from Europe at record speed. Thus, ironically, this year's MSC did not lay another brick in the wall of transatlantic deterrence but swung a sledgehammer at Western unity.

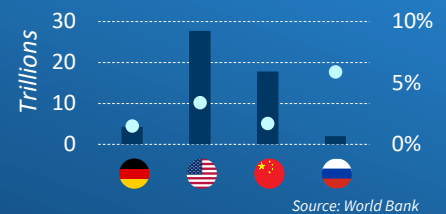
Vance's speech disrupted the conference, shifting its focus and influencing German participants' discussions. His remarks spurred reflection on Europe's need for self-reliance, despite differing views on the U.S. relationship and Russia's war in Ukraine. A "Munich Consensus" emerged: Europe must take greater responsibility for its defense.

The speech drew strong reactions from top German politicians. Defense Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) called Vance's comments "unacceptable", while Chancellor Scholz condemned U.S. interference in Germany's election, particularly in favor of the far-right AfD. CDU/CSU candidate Friedrich Merz also criticized Vance, emphasizing the legal limits of fake news, hate speech, and insults despite free speech protections.

German exports (€) to US and China



Strength test: GDP (US\$) and defense spending as % of GDP in 2023



China Seizes the Moment

China's foreign minister positioned Beijing as a defender of the rules-based international order, emphasizing cooperation and free trade. With the West mired in internal disputes, China's influence in the Global South is growing. Many emerging economies left Munich convinced that, while the West acknowledges their interests, it is increasingly unable to provide tangible solutions.

Germany in a Sandwich Position

Germany's military and economic reliance on the U.S., combined with its economic dependence on China – significant enough to prevent swift decoupling – places the new government in a complex strategic bind. The nation's previous geopolitical advantage, namely cheap Russian gas, access to Chinese markets, and American military protection, is no longer viable.

„Ironically, this year's MSC did not lay another brick in the wall of transatlantic deterrence but swung a sledgehammer at Western unity. The new federal government will have to deal with a fundamentally different international context.”



Jens Paulus
Senior Managing Director
Geopolitical Risk Advisory Lead

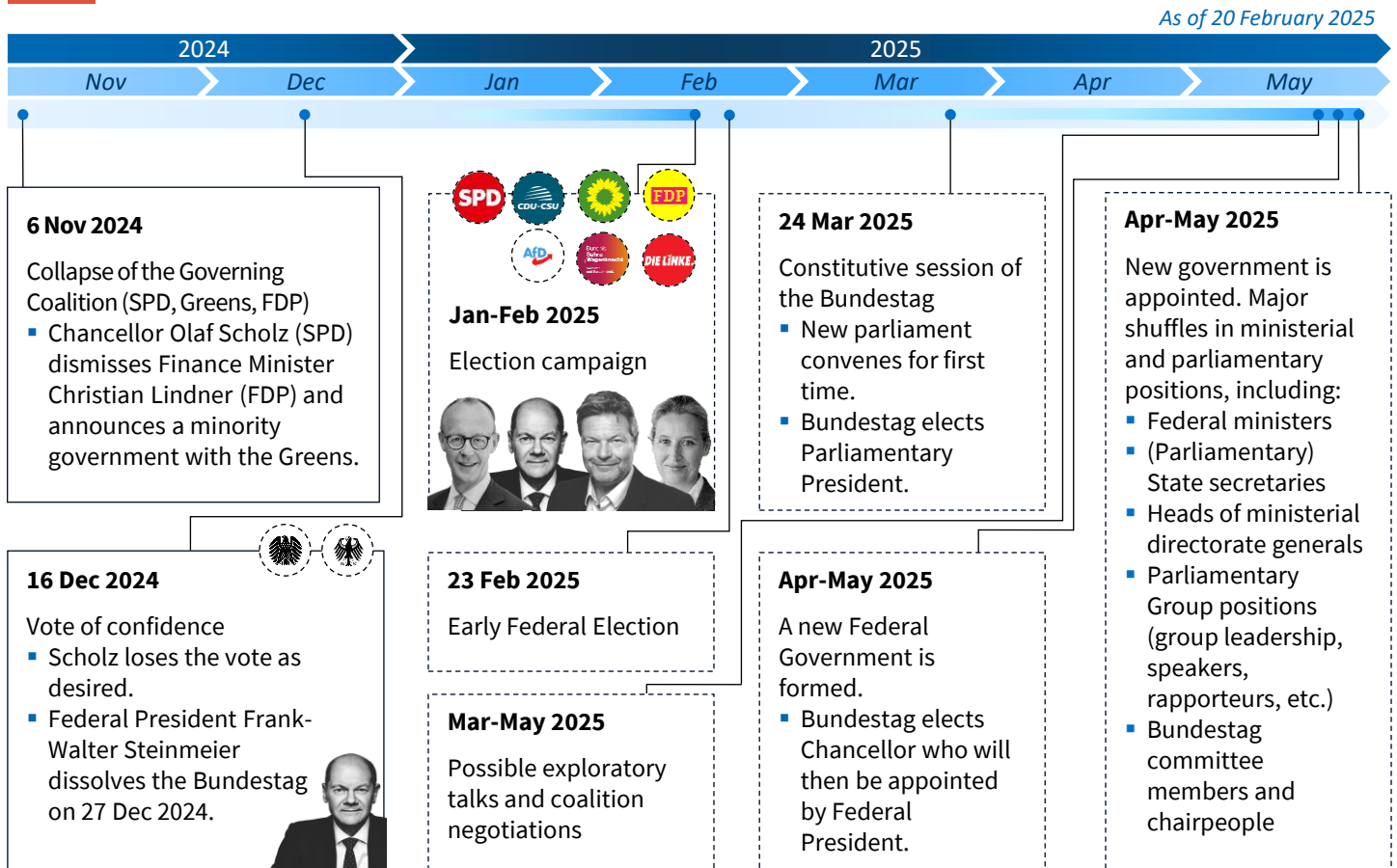
Elections Amid Global Tensions: A Critical Moment for Germany and Europe

With elections a week away, Germany's ability to make strategic decisions is constrained. This transition coincides with high-level international talks as Trump officials are negotiating with Russia in Saudi Arabia and European leaders meet in Paris to strengthen defense. German politicians were caught off guard by U.S.-Russia peace talks, with both Friedrich Merz and Chancellor Scholz asserting that German troop deployments to Ukraine are not under discussion.

A European consensus on strategic autonomy is emerging, centered on boosting defense through increased, debt-financed military spending. This will likely force Germany's next government to reconsider the debt brake and push for EU fiscal flexibility.

The MSC also signaled growing European unity in support of Ukraine. As Germany navigates this period of flux, its new government must swiftly balance deterrence, economic stability, and European cohesion – crucial for both national and regional security.

Timeline: Started from the bottom – now we’re here.



How did every party fare?

After the SPD-Greens-FDP coalition collapsed in November, parties quickly finalized manifestos, held conventions, and engaged voters. Public discontent fueled a clear shift to the right, while violence against campaigners underscored deepening political divisions.

SPD

The **SPD** struggled throughout the campaign, weakened by its choice to back Chancellor Olaf Scholz over Federal Defense Minister Boris Pistorius who enjoys significantly higher popularity ratings. Internal conflicts further diminished campaign efficacy.

CDU/CSU

CDU/CSU lead candidate Friedrich Merz has notably sharpened his conservative profile, taking a significant political risk through his indirect cooperation with the AfD faction in parliament amid the escalating migration debate.

Greens

The **Greens** were able to keep their poll ratings relatively stable but have hardly gained any new momentum. Traditional Green policy priorities were overshadowed by debates on migration and the economy, making it difficult for the party to present a clear vision for addressing the country’s challenges.

AFD

Social media proved to be a critical battleground ahead of the elections, with the **AFD** demonstrating its social media expertise early in the campaign - bolstered by notable support from U.S. entrepreneur Elon Musk.

Left

The Left, initially underestimated, made significant strides following the heated migration debate, particularly strengthening its position amongst young voters. In contrast, the **BSW** failed to sustain its early momentum, losing its appeal among left-wing protest voters.

FDP

The **FDP**’s campaign failed to reinvigorate the party, which struggled to credibly distance itself from its previous coalition with the SPD and Greens. A public scandal over internal strategy documents using war-like rhetoric further weakened its position heading into the election. Its re-entry into parliament now depends on how many strategic voters it can ultimately mobilize.



Top 3 Election Issues

Migration

After a deadly knife attack in Bavaria by an Afghan who was due for deportation, migration overtook the economy as the top campaign issue in January. The CDU/CSU even passed a parliamentary motion to tighten migration laws with the support of AfD votes, sparking controversy over whether the party's firewall against the AfD had effectively crumbled. Migration is likely to be a key point of contention in coalition talks with the SPD and Greens.



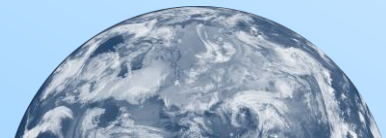
Economy

An ailing economy has been this election's second-largest issue. Growth has stalled since 2018, and in 2024, the country was in its second consecutive recession year. In the election campaign, the Greens and SPD proposed boosting the economy through public investment and a moderate reform of the debt brake. In contrast, the CDU/CSU and FDP advocated improving investment conditions by cutting bureaucracy and lowering taxes, rather than relying on sector-specific subsidies.



Foreign Policy

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and President Trump's inauguration, have pushed foreign policy to the forefront. New American tariffs and a shift in approach toward the Ukraine war have unsettled Europe. Chancellor Scholz's attempt to position himself as Europe's voice in response has gained little traction in the campaign. Likely future Chancellor Friedrich Merz is expected to adopt a more pragmatic, negotiation-driven approach.



Your top 3 coalition treaty priorities, Ms. / Mr. ...?



Claudia Roth (Greens)
Minister of State for Culture and Media

1. Advance climate protection with renewable energies and socially fair CO₂ pricing.
2. Strengthen cultural participation for all.
3. Promote social justice with fair wages, a rent cap, and affordable housing.



Christian Lindner (FDP)
FDP Chairman

The economic shift with lower taxes and less bureaucracy is non-negotiable. Germany's special path on climate targets must end – the European 2050 goal is ambitious enough. Private investments need to be strengthened through tax incentives.



Dr. Irene Mihalic (Greens)
First Parliamentary Secretary

The coalition agreement must include concrete measures for an affordable life, the protection of our climate, the further expansion of renewable energies, and the strengthening of our economy.



Dr. Konstantin von Notz (Greens)
Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Group

We must continue to advance the energy transition, respond decisively to real threats to our democracy from both within and outside, guarantee security, and preserve freedom – both nationally and internationally.



FTI-Exclusive Interview: POLITICO Berlin Playbook's Rixa Fürsen



Rixa Fürsen
Journalist, POLITICO

Q1: What makes this election different from previous ones?

The mood in the country. People are unsettled. Germany is weaker than it has been in decades – the government has failed, the economy is in decline, and the world is in turmoil. At the same time, many feel that despite growing problems, politics is stuck. Germany's stability has turned into stagnation, and people want change.

Q2: What was the most surprising or underreported story of this election for you?

The election campaign across all parties has been narrowed down to just a few key issues – economy, migration, and finance. Young people are being overlooked. They play hardly any role because among the nearly 60 million eligible voters, there are only about 2.4 million first-time voters. The topics that matter most to them – social justice, education, and climate – are being sidelined in the campaign. Education in particular is a neglected political issue, even though it has been known for years that school standards are declining.

What I find most interesting is how the relationship with Europe has changed during the campaign. Instead of positive associations, the EU is increasingly linked to problems. For a long time, the EU was our guarantee of peace and prosperity – now, Brussels has become a synonym for bureaucracy and failed migration policy.

Q3: What challenges do you see in forming a coalition government after the election?

That depends on which majorities are possible. Mathematically, a lot or very little could be feasible: If things go well for the CDU/CSU, a two-party coalition with either SPD or Greens will be possible. If two parties are not enough, a CDU/CSU-SPD-FDP or even a CDU/CSU-SPD-Green coalition might be necessary.

The SPD and the Greens will initially be preoccupied with internal struggles. Both parties will have many losers – especially the SPD. Internal power struggles could delay coalition negotiations with the CDU/CSU. Things could get even more complicated if the FDP acts as a kingmaker for a majority government. A lot of trust was lost between the Social Democrats and the Liberals during their time in the past coalition and rebuilding it will be a long process.

FTI-Exclusive Interview: Defense & Foreign Affairs Expert, Merle Spellerberg (Greens)



Merle Spellerberg (Greens)
Member of the Bundestag

Q1: What is your vision for the next government?

Looking ahead to the post-election phase, I see coalition-building as a key challenge. Swift negotiations and a quick agreement will be necessary regarding the geopolitical situation. I welcome Friedrich Merz's recent openness to talks with the Greens as democrats must be able to work together.

When asked about a potential coalition with the CDU/CSU, I acknowledge common ground in foreign policy but strongly criticize their voting alignment with the AfD on migration – a serious mistake and broken promise on Merz' side. However, I reject concerns that such a coalition would shift the Greens' direction and reaffirm Robert Habeck's leadership role.

Looking at climate policy and its role in the campaign I find it troubling that we are the only party addressing it with the urgency it requires.

Q2: As a Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee member, how do you evaluate the Munich Security Conference?

Recent U.S. statements on Ukraine are alarming. I remain steadfast that negotiations on Ukraine's future can only happen from a position of strength. To this end, the EU must assert itself in security policy and stay united. Especially if European troops are deployed, as the UK and Sweden offered, Europe must have a say in the final agreement.

Trump is not pursuing real peace but wants to appear as a "peacemaker". He and his administration threaten democracy worldwide to the extent that I no longer consider the current U.S. administration a reliable values-based partner. In fact, it may even be considered a systemic rival in certain matters.

For this reason, Germany must take a more pragmatic approach, strategically identifying common interests with the U.S., especially in trade and security matters. Additionally, we can still count on partners in individual U.S. states, rather than the federal administration. Trump seeks a fragmented Europe, employing a divide-and-conquer strategy, making EU unity all the more crucial.



The “invisible wall” still divides Germany 35 years after reunification

Germany’s reunification was an unprecedented event in Europe. Although the division may seem distant and even strange from today’s perspective, its impact is still deeply felt. This “invisible division” becomes especially visible in voting preferences. The right-wing populist party AfD receives significantly higher approval in East Germany than in the West. In the 2021 federal election, the proportion of AfD voters in East Germany was more than twice as high as in West Germany. This divide stems from economic disparities and demographic shifts. In the East, frustration over unfulfilled promises of reunification, lower wages, and fewer job opportunities contribute to political disillusionment. Many feel overlooked or disadvantaged – a sentiment reinforced by lingering stereotypes.

A legacy of prejudice

Western Germans sometimes hold biases against Eastern Germans, viewing them as less adaptable, nostalgic for the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or politically extreme. These perceptions can contribute to feelings of exclusion and frustration in the East. While East Germans had to adapt to a completely new system after 1990, West Germans largely continued their lives as before, leading to ongoing misunderstandings. This social divide remains an obstacle to full reunification.

Merkel: A symbol, not a solution

Angela Merkel, the first and presumably last chancellor from the former GDR, symbolized East-West unity but was unable to fully close the divide. Her consensus-driven leadership reflected her East German upbringing, but critics argue she failed to address deeper structural inequalities. Eastern Germans remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across various sectors. While they make up roughly 20% of Germany’s population, only 9.8% of top leadership positions are held by people from East Germany. In some sectors, such as business, the judiciary, and the military, the share drops to below 5%. This underrepresentation is more than just symbolic. It reinforces the perception among many Eastern Germans that they remain second-class citizens. Studies indicate that this feeling of exclusion weakens trust in democratic institutions and contributes to societal division. Merkel herself admitted that reunification is an ongoing process.

The 2025 Election: A test for unity

As the 2025 federal election nears, Germany faces political shifts. The AfD’s growing strength in the East highlights unresolved tensions. Addressing economic and social disparities, as well as overcoming prejudices, is key to breaking down the “invisible wall” that still separates East and West.

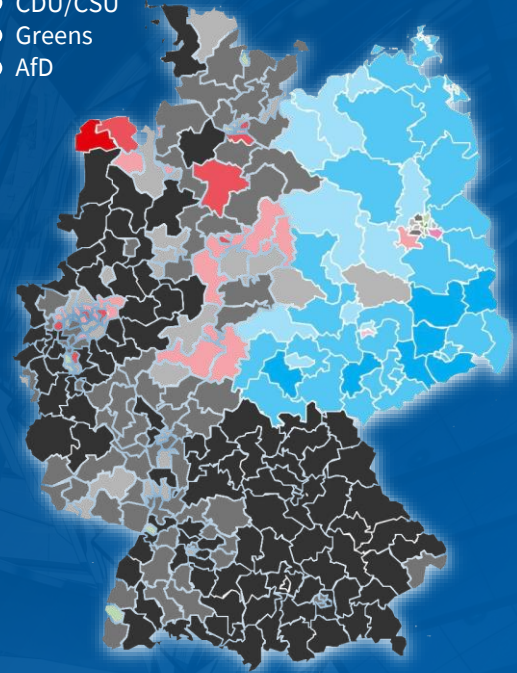
Contact

Want more? Got questions or feedback? Reach us at:

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Projected winner per constituency

- SPD
- CDU/CSU
- Greens
- AfD



Source: BILD, 11 January 2025