



Germany's September 26 Elections

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End of the Merkel Era

Germany's political landscape is in transition ahead of September 26, 2021, parliamentary elections that are to mark the end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's 16-year tenure. As the leader of the European Union's (EU's) most populous country and largest economy, Merkel has been a key interlocutor for the United States. Merkel's likely successors have pledged continuity in German foreign policy, but the end of the Merkel era—and her legacy of global leadership—[could have important implications](#) for U.S.-German and U.S.-European relations. Areas of particular concern for Congress could include Germany's policy toward Russia, China, and NATO.

Merkel's tenure has been viewed as a period of [remarkable stability](#) and economic prosperity in Germany. Analysts cite Merkel's pragmatism and centrist politics as key factors behind her political success. Germany's broader political landscape arguably has [become more fractured](#) during her time in office as the country's two main political parties—Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its current governing coalition partner, the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD)—have lost support to smaller parties on both sides of the political spectrum.

Possible Election Outcomes and Main Political Parties

On September 26, [voters will elect representatives to Germany's lower house of parliament](#), the *Bundestag*, which in turn elects the head of government, or chancellor. Political parties that surpass a 5% vote threshold gain representation in parliament. Germany's multiparty system leads to governing coalitions; only once since 1949 has a single party won the absolute majority necessary to elect a chancellor and legislate on its own.

[Recent polls](#) suggest the next government could be the first coalition of more than two parties since 1957. The SPD and CDU are projected to win the most votes, though neither is expected to exceed 30%. Most analysts expect the smaller Green party and/or Free Democratic Party (FDP) to be [potential kingmakers](#) in a governing coalition with either or both the CDU and SPD. As of September 16, 2021, [opinion polls](#) forecast the following results:

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- **Social Democratic Party (SPD), 25%** (*compared with 20.5% in the 2017 election*). After losing to the CDU in the past four *Bundestag* elections, including a record-low performance in 2017, the SPD has enjoyed a recent resurgence, buoyed by the popularity of its centrist candidate for chancellor, [Olaf Scholz](#), currently Germany's finance minister.
- **Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), 21%** (*32.9% in 2017*). Support for the center-right grouping of the CDU and its more conservative Bavarian sister-party has declined precipitously during the campaign as its candidate for chancellor, regional governor [Armin Laschet](#), has failed to gain traction among voters.
- **The Greens, 16%** (*8.9% in 2017*). As recently as March, a resurgent Green party was polling ahead of the SPD but has dropped in popularity amidst questions about the lack of governing experience of its candidate for chancellor, [Annalena Baerbock](#). Given the broad appeal of the party's environmental and free-market oriented platform, it is considered a potential coalition partner for either the SPD or CDU/CSU.
- **Free Democratic Party (FDP), 11%** (*10.7% in 2017*). The business-oriented, socially liberal party traditionally has been a coalition partner of the CDU/CSU. Although it has governed with the SPD in the past, the FDP's fiscal conservatism and support for tax cuts [could complicate](#) potential coalitions with the SPD and Greens.
- **Alternative for Germany (AfD), 11%** (*12.6% in 2017*). The far-right, anti-immigrant party first entered parliament in 2017. All parties have ruled out cooperation with AfD.
- **The Left, 6%** (*9.2% in 2017*). Some analysts speculate that the Left, a far-left outgrowth of East Germany's former communist party, could [join a coalition with the SPD](#) and Greens, but centrists within those parties are opposed.

Both Scholz (SPD) and Laschet (CDU) have campaigned largely on [platforms of continuity](#). Their main [policy differences](#) center on fiscal policy, with the SPD advocating more spending to address economic inequality and aging infrastructure. These differences are amplified between the Greens and the FDP, with the FDP strongly opposed to Green proposals for new taxes. All parties call for more far-reaching policies to mitigate climate change.

Implications for the United States

The two leading candidates to succeed Merkel have pledged [continuity in foreign affairs](#) and in relations with the United States, though their parties have differences on some key issues. Like Merkel, Scholz and Laschet may be reluctant to endorse a framework of "great power" competition between the West and China and Russia. Although they have condemned some Chinese and Russian policies, both are wary of jeopardizing strong economic and, in some cases, political relations. In general, the SPD is considered more open to dialogue with Russia and more reluctant to increase defense spending than the CDU.

Of the top parties, the Greens advocate the [biggest break from Merkel's foreign policy](#), calling, for example, for more concerted German and international responses to Russian aggression and Chinese human rights violations and opposing Russia's [Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline](#) to Germany.

- **Russia.** Scholz and Laschet say they support EU sectoral sanctions on Russia and continued German support for Ukraine. Although neither has opposed Nord Stream 2, both say they will uphold Germany's commitment to take action against Russia, including possible sanctions, if Moscow uses its energy resources as a weapon. In general, the SPD is considered more open to engagement with Russia than the CDU.

- **China.** Germany has faced heightened pressure from the United States to take a harder line on China, though there remains considerable support in Germany for a policy that emphasizes dialogue and seeks to avoid taking sides in U.S.-China disputes.
- **NATO and Defense Spending.** Germany has faced calls from successive Administrations to increase defense spending to meet NATO's benchmark of 2% of gross domestic product (GDP). Although the CDU has remained committed to the NATO target—[spending rose](#) from 1.4% of GDP in 2020 to 1.6% of GDP in 2021—SPD leaders have been [more reluctant](#), arguing that the target does not accurately measure Germany's broader contributions to global security.

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