

Campaign for Germany

Themes and Protagonists of the 2025 German Federal Election Campaign

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INTRODUCTION

On February 23, this Sunday, the polls open in Germany for early elections following the break-up of the SPD-FDP-Green coalition, dubbed as the “traffic light” coalition after the parties’ colors, at the end of last year. As at the time of writing this analysis the polls have not yet taken place, we do not know the results, however, the election campaign itself may still be worth our attention. Germany is one of the most important trading partners of Hungary, our partner in the major federal alliances and, in many respects, the engine of the European Union. Therefore, the political trends in Germany, the issues and actors that shape the election campaign have direct as well as indirect impact on the development of Hungarian politics. We will thus examine the key actors of the elections, how they try to gain the trust and votes of German voters, and the key themes of the German electoral campaign. In this analysis, we briefly introduce the seven parties of the current Bundestag that have a realistic chance of getting into the legislature again this year and examine how these parties position themselves on the key issues of the election campaign, based on their announced statements made during the campaign.

CDU/CSU

Although officially they may be two separate parties, in reality, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) have been a united political formation for more than half a century (in some respects, it can be compared to the Fidesz-KDNP alliance), and in this year's elections the CDU leader, the veteran Friedrich Merz is running for the chancellorship. The CDU/CSU as the flagship of German "mainstream" conservatism is campaigning with classic right-wing messages: they would cut back welfare spending and taxes to boost the economy, increase defence expenditure and take a strong stance against immigration. The party would increase the aids for Ukraine, develop the German military capacity, furthermore, at the debate of chancellor candidates on the 9th of February, Merz even added that it might be possible that under a Christian Democrat leadership, Germany would spend not only 25% of its GDP on defence, as NATO expects, but up to 3% on defence expenditure. The CDU/CSU is the clear frontrunner in this year's elections, with a virtually steady increase in support since their low point of the 2021 election defeat, although recent months have seen a few percentage points drop for Merz and his party.

SPD

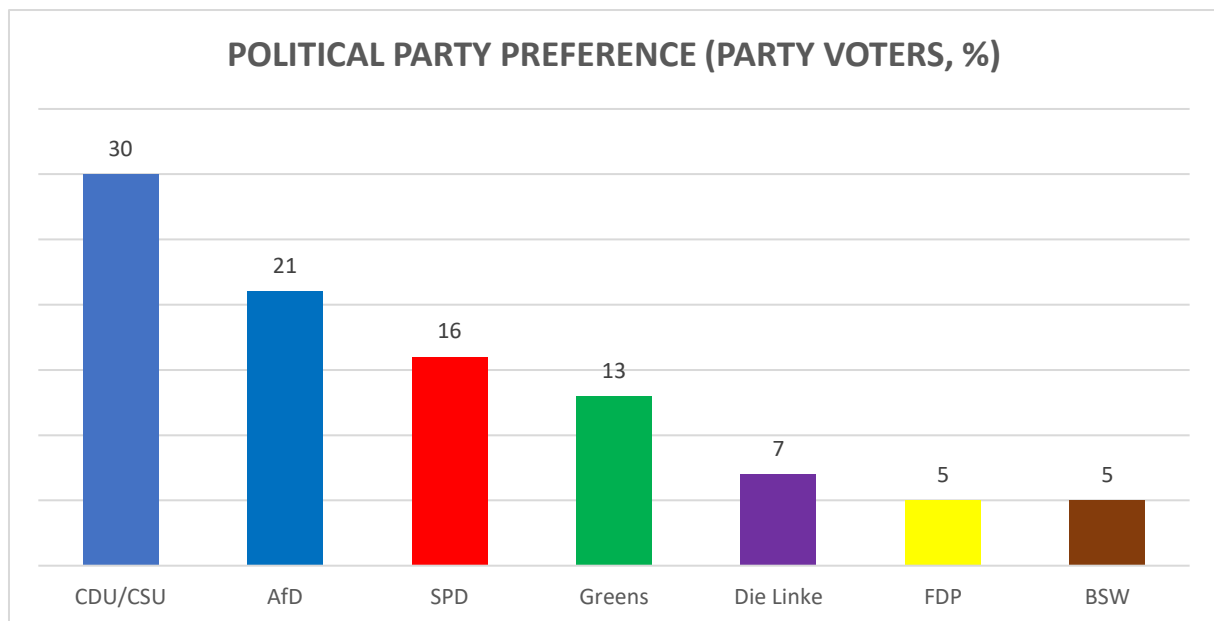
The winner of the last federal elections in 2021, the SPD, will contest the elections under the leadership of the current chancellor, Olaf Scholz. The war in Ukraine is one of the main issues in the elections, and Scholz regularly stresses that under his leadership Germany has been a firm supporter of Ukraine against Russian aggression and that this would not change. The Social Democrats want to tackle the current problems of the German economy with a left-wing agenda: they would increase the role of state in several areas, including raising family allowances, putting a price cap on network charges imposed by electricity network operators and revising the debt brake in the German constitution, i.e. allow the state to borrow more (although the "traffic light" coalition was hampered by a number of internal disagreements, as it is well known, it was the debt brake dispute that ultimately provided the cause for the breakup between the SPD and the Liberals). The SPD's popularity has been on the decline for years, largely due to coalition difficulties, and they could not stop this decline during the campaign either: with support at around 14% in February, the party is only third in the polls, down around 10 percentage points from five years ago.

AfD

The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) has been the clear political winner in Germany in recent years: the party has doubled its supporters since the 2021 elections (when they reached 10.4%, now they are at 20% or slightly above) and has become the second most supported political force in the country. At the heart of AfD's policies is the exploitation of social problems caused by immigration and the exploitation of dissatisfaction and mistrust of the traditional elite, closely related to the policies of either Viktor Orbán or Donald Trump. One of the AfD's main slogans is the term "remigration", which is considered blatantly extremist on German soil and which the party itself as only recently begun to openly embrace, and which would in practice mean the mass expulsion of people from migrant backgrounds from Germany. The party, whose candidate for chancellor, Alice Weidel, was recently received by Viktor Orbán at the Carmelite, openly denies man-made climate change and includes among its campaign promises the restart of coal-fired power plants that have been shut down. They also take a permissive stance towards Russia (some of the politicians are explicitly positive about Vladimir Putin), and refuses to support Ukraine.

The Greens

True to their name, the Greens' campaign platform is based on climate awareness and the promotion of a green transition, for which the party would provide substantial government support. Similarly to the SPD, they would reform the debt brake to allow higher borrowing and use the thus increased federal funds for green development of infrastructure, industry, and energy supply, as a way out for the German economy, which is in a slump. One of the emblematic elements of their left-green social policy is the "climate money" (Klimageld): the revenue from carbon pricing would be used to support the climate-neutral transition of low and middle-income households. ("Climate money" was also included in the program of the current government, but it was never implemented due to lack of resources, in the first place.) The Greens and their candidate of chancellor, Robert Habeck are firm supporters of Ukraine, and they are unique among the parties in their positive approach towards immigration: Germany is "a country of immigration" (Einwanderungsland) that welcomes and protects those who come, says the party's manifesto. Although the Greens' popularity has now declined compared to its surge in 2022, it is stable in that opinion polls show that it is now at a similar level to the 14.7% achieved in the 2021 elections.



Source: Politico Poll of Polls, February 17, 2025

The Left (Die Linke)

As the indirect successor to the former East German ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party, Die Linke (which, for the avoidance of confusion, is referred to by its original German name, unlike the Greens) carries a considerable communist heritage, and far-left ideas are also present among the party's current membership. They would substantially increase state expenditure on the economy, culture, education, research and development, while taxes would be raised for large corporations and a wealth tax would be introduced, among other tax increases. As a party strongly critical of the system, they argue for fundamental reform and/or replacement of inter- and supranational organisations and federal systems, and call for international disarmament. Die Linke condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine and calls for the withdrawal of Russian troops but does not support providing weapons to Ukraine. Die Linke has taken off in recent weeks: thanks to mainly its parliamentary group leader Heidi Reichin's highly effective social media campaign among young people and her passionate speeches that have gone viral in the online space, the party has doubled its support at the end of last year and is now polling at around 6-7% in mid-February.

BSW

The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, BSW) split from Die Linke in 2023 and officially became a party in January 2024. According to Wagenknecht, who previously led Die Linke, the left-wing party no longer adequately represented the working

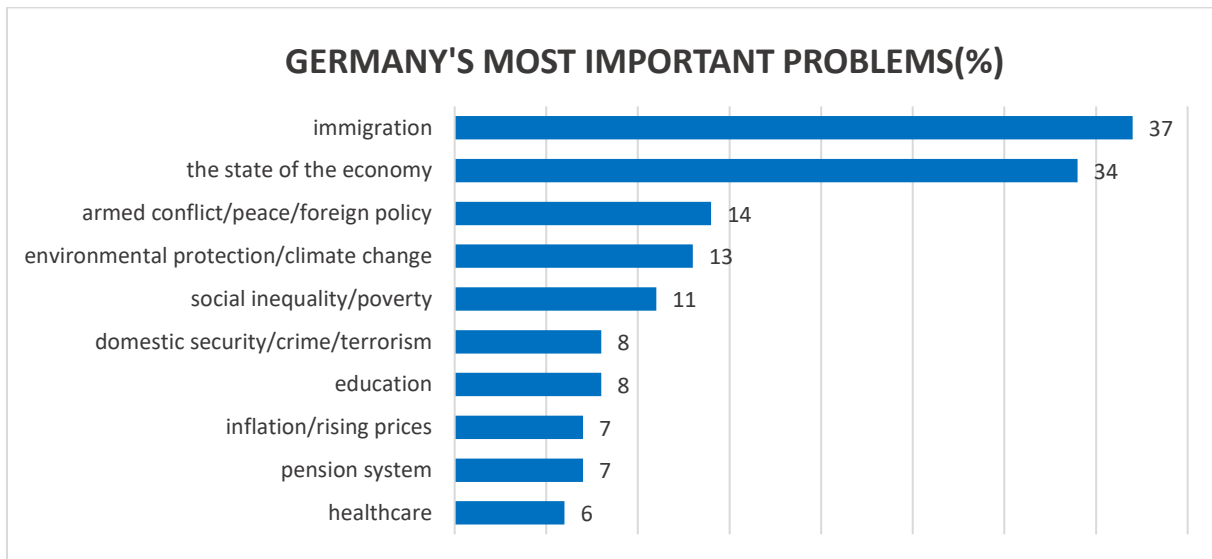
class, which turned to the AfD as a result (this criticism was largely based on Die Linke's failure in the 2023 Hesse and Bavarian state elections, where it failed to reach the 5% threshold for entry into parliament, while the AfD performed better than expected). The BSW takes a radical left-wing position similar to Die Linke on a number of economic and foreign policy issues (although it is more pro-Russian on the Russia-Ukraine war). The main difference between the two parties lies in their socio-political messages: while Die Linke campaigns with progressive, feminist messages promoting gender-equality and, like the Greens, with an inclusive stance towards immigration and immigrants, Wagenknecht in this regard resembles the AfD in this respect: anti-immigration, defending the "traditional family" and opposing the facilitation of name and gender changes. In 2024, the BSW started to grow rapidly, with support reaching almost 10% during the summer, but this momentum has now faded, mainly due to the rise of the AfD, and the Wagenknechts now seem to be very happy if they can reach 5%.

FDP

Support for the Liberals (Free Democratic Party – Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP), in government since 2021, has decreased in parallel with the SPD over the past four years and today the party is more likely measured below the 5% electoral threshold. The FDP is a classic liberal, free-market capitalist party with an economic agenda much closer to that of the CDU/CSU than to that of the SPD, with which it shares government: its campaign is based on tax cuts and reduction in the role of the state to boost the German economy. On the sensitive issue of debt brake, they are the most vocal opponents of reform, along with the AfD: they would, at all costs, keep the current rules, which prohibit the federal budget from accumulating debt above 0.35% of GDP per year (last year we saw that "at all costs" also included the break-up of the governing coalition). On the issue of migration, the FDP's position hardened for this year's elections: while they traditionally promote the values of multiculturalism and support legal immigration, they promise a tougher stance against those who are staying in Germany without authorization. The FDP is a firm supporter of Ukraine against Russia, and its leader Christian Lindner has repeatedly stressed that his party has never hesitated on the issue, unlike Olaf Scholz.

THE MAIN CAMPAIGN ISSUES

During the German election campaign, the parties focused their attention on two plus one main issues that are likely to be decisive in determining who may become members of the newly forming legislature and who may form the government. These are, as all polls broadly agree, the economy, migration, and the plus one: the relationship with the AfD. In reviewing the campaign themes and how they are reflected in party communications, we focus on the strategy of the four big parties: the CDU/CSU, the SPD, the AfD, and the Greens.



Source: ARD-Deutschlandtrend / infratest dimap, January 9, 2025

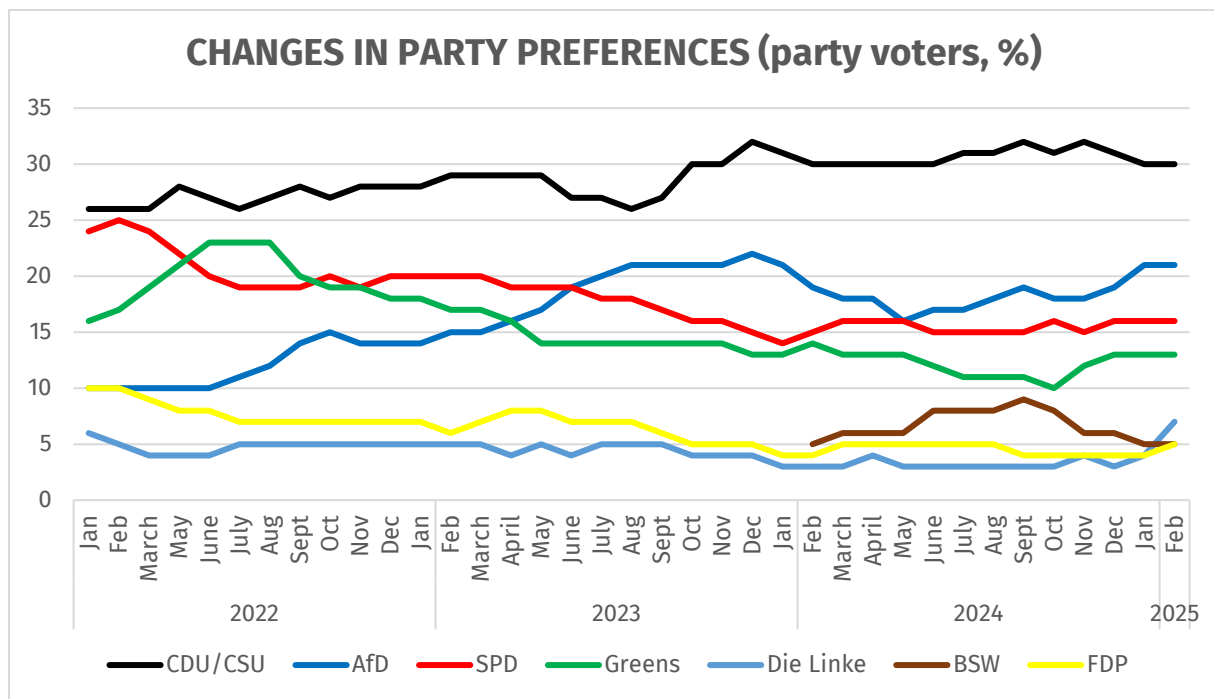
Economy

The German economy has been in recession for two years, the first time in more than two decades. The industry, especially the automotive industry, is suffering, and it was this economic situation that finally pulled the rug out from under the feet of the “traffic light” coalition, as extra resources were needed to implement the government’s program, while the FDP’s Finance Minister Lindner clung stubbornly to the borrowing limit imposed by the debt brake.

The fact that economic recovery is a key issue for the voters is also felt by the parties, as it is a central element of both the government programs (German parties publish detailed programs in the months before elections; these are not merely prepared “for the drawer”, they receive significant media coverage and are considered a regular reference point) and campaigns.

Although it is divided between several parties, there are basically two competing proposals: a right-wing/liberal approach based on tax cuts and cutting back on state expenditures, and a left-wing approach that increases the role of the state and boosts redistribution by raising taxes on the wealthy. The former is represented by the CDU/CSU, AfD and FDP, the latter by the SPD, Greens, Die Linke and BSW. Of course, during the campaign, the individual models mostly appeared only at the level of slogans, but it is important to note that even then it is not the proposals themselves that really matter. In a political contest, it is not necessarily the one who offers the better solution (if such a solution even exists) that achieves greater success, but rather the one who can generate more trust in voters regarding their own policies. In this regard, Merz and the CDU/CSU have a significant advantage over the coalition parties in the government, as they can blame the Scholz-led government for the current situation – and they do. It is worth observing the evolution of opinion polls since the last elections: the popularity of the SPD and the FDP did not collapse when the coalition fell apart, but has been gradually declining for years, thanks to internal conflicts and the deteriorating economic situation. (The Greens have also lost a lot of support compared to their 2022 peak, but in their case, this is more due to, among other things, the marginalization of climate policy and the fact that system-critical young voters found a governing party, which has to make often painful compromises that come with governing, much less attractive.)

So, while the economy is a major issue in the German elections, the campaign has been dominated by the question of whether Olaf Scholz and his party can convince voters not only that economic difficulties can be solved by left-wing policies, but also that they can implement their program. According to pre-election polling data, the answer is clearly no; in fact, Scholz did not manage to regain ground even by attempting to shift the focus to a different topic in the final stages of the campaign.



Source: Politico Poll of Polls

Immigration

There is no question which party has benefited most from the heightened social tensions over immigration and the integration of immigrants in Germany: AfD is set to score the biggest electoral success in its history this Sunday. Ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, scandals surrounding the party – including the relativization of Nazi crimes and its ties to China and Russia – ultimately played a major role in the breakup of the Identity and Democracy group and the formation of two separate far-right groups in the EP (excluding the European Conservatives and Reformists group). However, these controversies faded in comparison to the intensity of public sentiment on immigration in German society. As a result, the AfD, whose campaign was practically built around this single issue, was able to continue strengthening. Alice Weidel and her party would restore permanent controls at Germany’s borders – in violation of the Schengen agreement – and since January this year has openly advocated for a policy of “remigration”, which in practice would mean mass expulsions of people from immigrant backgrounds, including those with German citizenship. It clearly reflects the shifting political winds that last year, Weidel distanced herself from the scandal that led to nationwide anti-AfD protests. The controversy erupted after it was revealed that AfD’s leading politicians had discussed the possibilities of remigration at a far-right meeting in the company of a former Austrian neo-Nazi.

Whether it is due to the pressure caused by the AfD's popularity or the migration situation itself is difficult to determine, but one thing is certain: a general shift to the right can be observed among most parties regarding migration. The SPD, which otherwise supports legal immigration, is now much more cautious in its rhetoric than before, prioritizing security concerns and the reduction of illegal migration. Angela Merkel's era of "Willkommenskultur" has clearly come to an end in Germany. The CDU/CSU is proposing extremely strict immigration measures and, in its program, calls for the "immediate, de facto freeze" of migration, which would mean the immediate rejection of those attempting to enter the country illegally via its land borders. Merz, whose relationship with Merkel has never been particularly friendly, directly criticized the former chancellor and her immigration policies, stating in December: "We also made mistakes during our time in government – and we have learned from them."

During the campaign, we witnessed a "race to toughen" on immigration policies, but even this has its limits. The CDU/CSU risks endangering itself if it drifts too close to the highly unpopular AfD, which remains untouchable among mainstream parties. Due to its stance on migration and the controversial parliamentary vote in January, Scholz argued in the final month before the elections that Merz and his party were flirting with the far right.

Relationship with the AfD

In Hungary, it also made front-page news when, on January 29 of this year, the CDU/CSU broke the post-World War II consensus by attempting – ultimately unsuccessfully – to pass a bill tightening immigration regulations in the Bundestag with the support of the AfD. Germany's mainstream parties have treated any form of cooperation with the far right as a taboo for decades, making Merz's move a major political storm. Scholz, who – according to polls – had been unsuccessfully trying to restore voter trust in the SPD, immediately seized on the issue. The Social Democrats accuse the Christian Democrats of normalizing the AfD and its policies, while Scholz himself claims that Merz would even be willing to form a coalition with the AfD if necessary. Merz, of course, firmly denies this and has repeatedly stated on various platforms that cooperation with the AfD is out of the question. During the televised debate between the four chancellor candidates (Merz, Scholz, Habeck and Weidel), he, along with two of his colleagues, distanced himself from the AfD leader, whom they all sharply criticized.

The rise of the far-right has long been a topic in German politics, but in the weeks leading up to the elections, it became the focal point of the campaign. Several tens of thousands,

even hundreds of thousands, of anti-far-right protests took place in Germany's major cities, with protesters openly expressing their disappointment and criticism toward Merz and the Christian Democrats. However, it is important to note that these protests were not organized by political parties, and although Scholz tried to capitalize on the outrage against the CDU/CSU, it seems the Social Democrats were unable to channel the emotions that surfaced during the protests. However, this does not mean that the CDU/CSU did not lose ground in its vote alongside the AfD. Merz has long been aware that the AfD's rise poses risks for the CDU/CSU as well. During the campaign, he sought to deflate the far-right's momentum by pushing his own party in a more extreme direction—at least on the issue of immigration—trying to attract Weidel's voters. This strategy aligns with his parliamentary proposal to tighten immigration rules. However, the tactic backfired: not only did it alienate centrist voters, but it also helped the AfD continue down the path of normalization.

For the AfD, the 2025 elections could be a historic success not only because they are likely to achieve their best result ever, but also because, during the campaign, they managed at least to begin dismantling the “cordon sanitaire” (or “firewall”, as it is referred to in Germany) that has kept the German far-right isolated from the political mainstream for decades. Three events stand out as particularly significant in this regard: the aforementioned parliamentary vote; Elon Musk's public support (with perhaps the most notable expressions being his January 9 conversation with Alice Weidel, broadcast on X, and his online appearance at the AfD's January 25 campaign event); and Weidel's visit to Viktor Orbán on February 12, which was of great importance for breaking the party's international isolation.

It is worth considering that the parties that tried to “be more AfD than AfD”, using far-right tactics to siphon voters away from Weidel's party, did not succeed. Neither Merz and the CDU/CSU, nor the Wagenknecht-led alliance, which, alongside its far-left economic and foreign policies, explicitly embraced a far-right, law-and-order stance similar to that of the AfD, were able to achieve their goals. They believed this approach would strengthen their party, but it ultimately did not work.

At the moment, it seems that building on the strength of one extreme leads to the reinforcement of the other, given the right campaign strategy. One of the biggest political winners of the first two months of 2025 is Die Linke, primarily thanks to its faction leader, Heidi Reichin, who has successfully reached out to young voters – likely including participants from the recent protests. Radical, system-critical parties are always more

attractive to young people, and Die Linke (which also holds a pariah status in German politics, though it doesn't face a "firewall" like AfD – at least what is left of it) is clearly one of them. Reichin's passionate speech, which she delivered on January 29 in the Bundestag after the infamous CDU/CSU-AfD vote, became a TikTok sensation. With more than 6.5 million views, she is now referred to as "the TikTok queen" by her fans.



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