

Germany's September 26 Elections

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Merkel Era Ends, Successor Unclear

None of the candidates to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel won a clear governing mandate in Germany's September 26, 2021, parliamentary elections. The center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has been Merkel's junior coalition partner for 12 of her 16 years in office, beat Merkel's center-right political group by 1.6 percentage points, but neither party exceeded 26% of the vote.

Merkel, who was not a candidate in the elections, is to remain chancellor during what some analysts expect could be [protracted negotiations](#) to form a new government. Merkel's likely successors have pledged continuity in German foreign policy and relations with the United States, 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 policies toward Russia, China, and NATO.

Merkel's tenure has been viewed as a period of [remarkable stability](#) and economic prosperity in Germany. The country's broader political landscape arguably has [become more fractured](#) during her time in office, however, as Germany's two main political parties—the SPD and Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—have lost support to smaller parties on both sides of the political spectrum.

Election Results

On September 26, [voters elected representatives to Germany's lower house of parliament](#), the *Bundestag*, which in turn will elect the next head of government, or chancellor. Political parties must surpass a 5% vote threshold to hold seats 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. The [results of the September 26 elections](#) suggest the next government could be the first coalition of more than two parties since 1957:

- **Social Democratic Party (SPD), 25.7%** (*compared with 20.5% in the 2017 election*). After finishing second to the CDU in the past four *Bundestag* elections, the SPD enjoyed a late resurgence in the campaign, buoyed by the popularity of its centrist candidate for chancellor, [Olaf Scholz](#), currently Germany's finance minister.

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- **Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), 24.1%** (*32.9% in 2017*). The result was a record low for the center-right grouping of the CDU and its more conservative Bavarian sister party as their candidate for chancellor, regional governor [Armin Laschet](#), failed to gain traction among voters.
- **The Greens, 14.8%** (*8.9% in 2017*). The result was a marked improvement over the 2017 elections but [fell short](#) of opinion polls in the summer that suggested the party could exceed 20%. Some analysts attributed the drop in popularity to concerns 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 the CDU/CSU.
- **Free Democratic Party (FDP), 11.5%** (*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 the Greens.
- **Alternative for Germany (AfD), 10.3%** (*12.6% in 2017*). The far-right, anti-immigrant party lost seats after first entering parliament in 2017 but retains strong support in some parts of [eastern Germany](#). All other parties have ruled out cooperation with AfD.
- **The Left, 4.9%** (*9.2% in 2017*). The result was a disappointment for the far-left outgrowth of East Germany's former communist party, which will remain in parliament because three directly elected candidates take it over the necessary 5% vote threshold.

Both the SPD's Olaf Scholz and the CDU's Armin Laschet have said the election results entitle them to lead the next government. Although most observers expect [Scholz to prevail](#) given his party's first-place finish, Laschet underscores the SPD's small margin of victory and both parties' historically low vote totals. Both say they will seek to govern with the Greens and the FDP. Differences between the two smaller parties, especially on [fiscal policy](#)—the FDP opposes Green and SPD proposals for new taxes—could be key issues in coalition negotiations. Should negotiations for a three-party coalition fail, the SPD and CDU/CSU could agree to govern in a “grand coalition.”

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 stress the importance of continued engagement and are wary of jeopardizing economic relations.

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 U.S. 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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