



# BULLETIN

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## Germany Chooses: Scenarios for the 2013 Federal Vote

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*In the final stage of the election campaign in Germany, the Christian Democrats are maintaining their “asymmetrically” strong position, but the prospects for a continuation of the current coalition with the Liberals are small. Indeed, although other coalition options are widely discussed by media, only a grand coalition seems politically feasible. This outcome will only complicate the allocation of portfolios within the next German government, about which there is already much uncertainty.*

**The Hidden Kingmakers—Undecided Voters.** According to the latest polls, support for the centre-right CDU/CSU (black) is at 38–40%, whilst the SPD (red) has 26–28%, the GREENS 8–11%, the LEFT 8.5–10%, and the FDP (yellow) is just above the parliamentary threshold at 5–6%.<sup>1</sup> The two main hopefuls, the Pirate party and Alternative for Germany (AfD), have too little to enter parliament, though one poll<sup>2</sup> shows AfD has already required the requisite 5%. There is one caveat: the Pirates are already represented in four regional parliaments. AfD is a newcomer on the political scene. Representing Eurosceptic ideas, it may have support from individuals surveyed for opinion polls who have not been open about their intention to vote for the party and it may receive more votes than polls predict.

Nevertheless, the current survey results do indicate clear trends. There is no definite majority for the incumbent black-yellow governing coalition, which would accumulate just 46% of votes. Meanwhile the competing red-green project is missing a sufficient support level, too, in particular after recent declines experienced by the GREENS. As to the expected level of voter turnout, 69% currently have declared an intention to participate, with a further 13% willing but hesitant. What makes the final outcome difficult to predict is the significant share of undecided voters, which amounts to about 30%. It is worth noting, though, that this part of the electorate is heterogenic and cannot be clearly attributed to one of the political camps.

And yet, one trend emerges strongly: the majority of Germans polled expressed a wish that the CDU's Angela Merkel remain Federal Chancellor. An electoral campaign heavily reliant on the appeal of her personality is proving effective. Of all voters polled, 58% would vote for her if there were a presidential-style direct election, with only 32% preferring the SPD's Peer Steinbrück. Thus, Merkel will probably remain in office. It is still unclear, however, with which partners she will govern, and thus how strong the Chancellery will be and what the distribution of portfolios will look like.

**The Rise and (Avoidable) Fall of the FDP.** The probability of a new black-yellow coalition diminished after the 15 September election in Bavaria, which brought a clear victory for the CDU's sister party, the CSU, and an overwhelming defeat of the FDP (CSU 47.7%, SPD 20.6%, GREENS 8.6%, FDP 3.3%). Of course, it's not the first time the party has dropped out of the Bavarian parliament. Indeed, even on the federal level, it has on occasion been close to the threshold. Nevertheless, the FDP remains the party that has spent more time in federal government than any other. The disappointing result in Bavaria, coupled with speculation that some potential FDP voters would shift to the

<sup>1</sup> According to polls by Allensbach (18 September 2013), INSA (19 September 2013), Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (19 September 2013), and Forsa (17, 20 September 2013), <http://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> INSA (19 September 2013), <http://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/insa.htm>.

eurosceptic AfD (which was not on the ballot in the Land), will make the public wonder. The failure in Bavaria just before the federal election may persuade some that a vote for the FDP is a “wasted” vote.

The party then is desperately calling upon Merkel supporters to give their second vote tactically to the FDP. The Christian Democrats are hostile to the idea. Securing the chancellorship for Merkel has clear priority. In the Lower Saxony vote in January this year, the sitting prime minister enjoyed high personal popularity, and the CDU counted on staying in the government. They fell short not least because of the significant number of “second votes” transferred to the FDP from CDU supporters worried about the possible lack of a coalition partner for their party. A new election law, though, makes vote-splitting less attractive than before.

At the final stage of the campaign, therefore, there is not only competition between the governing and opposition parties but also growing distance between the coalition parties themselves. Although publicly both parties are sticking to the goal of coalition, this time the CDU manifesto does not identify the FDP as the preferred coalition partner. Even if the liberals did reach the 5% mark, moreover, a new black-yellow coalition would see a greatly weakened FDP compared to 2009 when it had a historic high of 14.6% of the vote. Meanwhile, the CSU could enjoy better standing on the basis of its improved election performance. The Bavarian election has given the party six flexible votes in the Bundesrat, the second chamber of the federal parliament comprised of Lander ministers and officials.

**Third Time Lucky—the Grand Coalition Once Again?** The most likely outcome for now seems to be a grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD, which could gain almost 70% of the vote. Such a solution, however, is strongly resisted by SPD, and a special party congress has already been convened to decide on future participation in the government. Party members cannot ignore the fact that after the grand coalition of 2005–2009, the SPD achieved its worst election results ever and a weak performance this time would also accelerate the party’s leadership struggles—all complicating factors in the discussion of portfolios and personnel decisions when it comes to forming a new government.

However, acceptance for a grand coalition has increased with diminishing prospects for a coalition with the GREENS, who have experienced a precipitous fall in support in the closing stages of the campaign. For the CDU, one compelling argument in favour of a grand coalition would be greater influence (27 seats of 69) than in the case of the black-yellow coalition (15 seats, with the ultimate outcome resting on the regional election in Hesse on 22 September) in the Bundesrat, where an overall majority is helpful in pushing through a legislative agenda. Moreover, the third grand coalition in the Federal republic would have a different character from the finely balanced first and second: the difference in the polls between CDU/CSU and SPD indicates 10–15 p.p. in public support and would be reflected in the distribution of portfolios.

Interestingly, statements by leading politicians as to the function they would like to assume highlight changes in political practice. The junior partner usually gets the posts of vice-chancellor and foreign affairs, which is of diminishing importance. Today, the GREENS’ top candidate, Jürgen Trittin, expresses more of an interest in the finance ministry than the foreign office. Furthermore Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who was a foreign minister in the first cabinet led by Merkel, has indicated that he would like to keep his current position as parliamentary group leader. No wonder Guido Westerwelle, the incumbent, has found himself estranged from domestic politics and bereft of party leadership. Instead, the ministry of finance looks set to emerge as a bone of contention, which also has significant external implications, bearing in mind the role of the ministry in euro-crisis management.

**Conclusions.** In light of the polls, the upcoming election would confirm the evolution of the German political scene towards asymmetry with a strong position for one of the catch-all parties (Volksparteien). This would be so, even in a grand coalition. Success will strengthen Merkel in her own party and the CSU, while all potential coalition partners face leadership struggles and damaging electoral post-mortems. The most likely coalition configurations are the grand coalition or a continuation of the black-yellow cabinet, yet there is also the possibility of an alliance between Christian Democrats and the GREENS. A black-GREENS combination would, however, be difficult to implement, if experience at the regional level is anything to go by, even if CDU energy policy has ostensibly reduced possible tensions. Such a coalition would also lack influence in the Bundesrat. But conversely, the currently rather unlikely leftist coalition of SPD, GREENS and the LEFT would have an absolute majority in the Bundesrat.

Should the grand coalition emerge, one could expect—keeping in mind the experience of 2005–2009—a continued policy of pragmatism guided by interests. The German government would be capable of political leadership both internally and in Europe thanks to its broad legitimacy. From the point of view of Poland, bilateral relations have reached such a high level of maturity that regardless of the future political coalition in Berlin, the Polish–German relationship is expected to dynamically evolve further.