

GERMANY: What to watch on and beyond election night

Ahead of the 26 September Bundestag elections, the overall polling picture remains unchanged. At around 25%, the Social Democrats (SPD) of Finance Minister Olaf Scholz continue to lead ahead of Armin Laschet's Christian alliance (CDU/CSU) – even if the latter seems to have climbed slightly farther above 20% again. Therefore, each of the two major parties could form a coalition with the Greens and the center-right Liberals (FDP). A left-of-center government of SPD, the Greens, and the post-communist Left – and perhaps even another grand coalition of SPD and CDU/CSU – might also be possible numerically, but will not be the first choice, as discussed in the past.

Here are four signposts to watch in the run-up to and beyond Sunday night:

Momentum

Following the slight improvement in the polls for CDU/CSU, one factor to watch is whether this turns into some last-minute momentum on election day. Another factor to watch could be the result of the Greens: since Annalena Baerbock fell back into third place, she has put in solid performances in the TV debates, presenting herself as an alternative to her two male contenders wrangling with each other; combined with the expected high turnout in cities and via postal ballot, the Greens' result could potentially still surprise.

Timing

Polling stations will close, and the first exit polls will be published, at 6pm Berlin time. Within the following 30 minutes, a first projection should be available. The high number of postal ballots should not dramatically delay the counting process, as the preparation of the envelopes and a first validity check are conducted already before 6pm. At previous elections, a good impression of the final result and coalition options was usually available around 10.30pm. One factor that could delay clarity is the fate of the Left, which is currently polling just above the 5% threshold. If the party does not make it into the next Bundestag, a majority for SPD and Greens alone could perhaps become a possibility.

Talks

Party leaderships will assess the official results in meetings on Monday morning, formally offering exploratory talks to potential coalition partners. These talks, as well as subsequent coalition negotiations, might take several weeks, given the likely need to forge an untested three-way coalition. As in 2017, coalition negotiations could still fail at a late stage, necessitating the search for alternative combinations.

CDU/CSU

Merkel's 16 years at the chancellery seem to have exhausted her party on the personnel and programmatic fronts. If Sunday's result is as bad as currently predicted – with losses of around ten percentage points over 2017 – a debate

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about Laschet's leadership might erupt right away on Sunday evening. Merkel faced a similar danger after her worse-than-expected performance in 2005 – until blatant attacks by narrowly defeated chancellor Schroeder forced Merkel's putsch-ready companions to rally around their embattled leader instead. This ultimately paved the way for her to the chancellery. However, it is dubious whether the numerical possibility of a government with the Greens and the FDP could provide comparable protection for Laschet. For instance, CSU leader Markus Soeder seems keen on trying his luck at the chancellorship in 2025. CDU/CSU traditionally consider themselves as Germany's natural governing force; infighting and a sense of anger after a painful defeat could create risks for whoever leads the next government, potentially far beyond election night.

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