



# GERMAN FEDERAL SNAP ELECTION 2025

## BACKGROUND

German voters will head to the polls on **February 23** to elect a new lower house of parliament. This election comes at a precarious time, coinciding with a contracting economy, a growing dispute over migration, and the Ukraine-Russia war dominating the 2025 fight for representation in Germany's *Bundestag* (parliament).

The upcoming snap election was called after the collapse of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's tripartite "traffic-light" coalition—comprised of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Free Democrats (FDP)—in November last year. The dissolution was triggered by Scholz's dismissal of Finance Minister Christian Lindner, as the three coalition parties were fundamentally at odds over economic policy, particularly regarding whether to adhere to Germany's so-called "debt brake" —a constitutionally enforced budgetary discipline—leaving future aid for Ukraine hanging in the balance.

The election will determine the composition of the next government, with Friedrich Merz's Christian Democrats conservative bloc – comprising the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its regional Bavarian "sister party," the Christian Social Union (CSU) - are expected to lead. While the overall outcome of the February 23 vote seems predictable, the coalition makeup remains uncertain. No party is expected to secure an outright majority, and smaller parties are seeking to hit the 5 percent mark to secure representation, with Die Linke (the Left), the leftist Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) and Free Democrats (FDP) all polling close to this figure. The future composition of the government will hinge on how many parties make it into the Bundestag – with small margins potentially having outsized impacts on Germany's political landscape. More parties meeting the threshold could necessitate another tripartite arrangement, compromising the coalition negotiations that will be crucial in shaping Germany's future policy direction.

Snap elections are rare in Germany due to its historical experience with frequent elections during the Weimar Republic, which ultimately paved the way for the rise of the Nazi Party. This will be only the fourth snap election in the country's post-World War II history. Amid economic downturn, political deadlock, and rising extremism—exacerbated by recent right-wing and refugee-related attacks—prolonged instability could embolden extremist far-right parties like the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany or AfD), further fracturing Germany's political landscape. Beyond Germany, this instability will also weaken broader EU cohesion and its ability to tackle international challenges such as an increasingly confrontational U.S. foreign policy under Trump and Russian aggression. Several difficult policy questions demand cohesion and a unified approach with clear direction. The composition of the next government will shape how Germany navigates this complex set of challenges.

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

**Defense Policy & European Support for Ukraine:** German defense policy is a central issue in the election, with support for Ukraine shaping key debates. Uncertainty over U.S. aid has heightened following President Donald Trump's negotiations with Russian leader Vladimir Putin, leading many to believe he

## KEY INDIVIDUALS

**Friedrich Merz (Christian Democrats):** Front-runner in the election campaign. Advocates for a revival of Franco-German relations, free trade, a migration crackdown in the name of crime reduction, and increased defense spending while maintaining the debt-brake. Supports free trade with Trump but remains pro-Europe.

**Alice Weidel (AfD):** Far-right candidate and currently polling second. Advocates "traditional" German culture and rejects Islam as being compatible with the constitution, mass deportation ("remigration"), ending sanctions on Russia, and rejecting climate change action. All major parties refuse to ally with AfD.

**Olaf Scholz (SPD):** Center-left Social Democrat, Germany's current chancellor. Polling third due to unpopularity over perceived weak leadership during the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as energy shortages and high inflation.

**Christian Lindner (FDP):** The ex-Finance Minister and Free Democratic Party leader is battling to re-enter the Bundestag as the FDP teeters near the 5 percent mark. He played a key role in collapsing the ruling coalition.

**Robert Habeck (Grüne):** Co-leader of the Greens, polling between third and fourth place. He focuses on climate change, green energy investments, and supports reforming the debt brake.

## KEY EVENTS

**December 24, 2024:** A Saudi-born man drives into a Christmas market in Magdeburg, killing five and injuring over 200. The AfD holds a



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may pressure Ukraine into an unfavorable deal by threatening to cut support. This raises the possibility that France and Germany will need to fill the gaps left by reduced American aid, reinforcing Europe's need for greater self-reliance and increasing pressure to reform the debt-brake to secure funding. Berlin is pushing for a military buildup, aiming to allocate 3 percent of its economic output to defense, but financing remains uncertain. Chancellor Scholz's €100 billion Bundeswehr fund, introduced in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine to reinforce Germany's military capacity, is depleted, and strict borrowing limits constrain increased spending. While Germany has fiscal room to boost spending, political inertia complicates the issue. If elected, Merz will face the same fiscal constraints as his predecessor, including the debt brake. Germany's €52 billion defense budget is insufficient for NATO commitments, and a coalition deadlock delays a 2025 budget agreement. With Ukraine facing a critical next few months on the battlefield, strong European leadership is essential. As Ukraine's largest military backer, Germany will also play a key role in long-term deterrence against Russia making this election crucial for European security.

**Normalization of the Far-Right and Increasing Polarization:** Germany's election tests the resilience of its political center as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) surges to 21 percent in the polls, likely making it the strongest opposition party. A *Brandmauer* or "firewall"—the post-war political consensus among mainstream parties to exclude far-right groups from governance—has so far prevented the AfD from gaining legislative power. However, its migration rhetoric and growing support, particularly in the East, have reshaped mainstream political discourse. Concerns that this "firewall" is weakening grew when Merz sought to pass stringent anti-immigrant legislation in the Bundestag with AfD support after a series of terrorist attacks by migrants. This marked the first breach of the post-war quarantine of the far right, triggering nationwide protests against what many saw as its normalization. Though the bill was rejected, Merz faced criticism for attempting to siphon votes from the AfD along polarizing lines. In 2024, rising political polarization—fueled by protests, strikes, and violence—has made migration a defining election issue, pushing major parties toward stricter stances. AfD's rise has also been bolstered by external support, including Elon Musk and figures close to U.S. President Donald Trump. U.S. Vice President JD Vance's call for Germany to reconsider working with AfD has further fueled fears of normalization. While AfD's radical platform—opposing NATO, advocating EU withdrawal, and supporting Russian negotiations—limits its mainstream alliances, its growing influence is undeniable. With the party projected to hold a fifth of parliamentary seats, it could obstruct legislation, particularly on issues like increasing aid to Ukraine.

**Disintegration of Germany's Economic Model:** After years of Germany's position as the "economic engine of Europe," its economy is stagnating, contracting for two consecutive years with rising unemployment and uncertainty. Fears of U.S. import tariffs worsen instability, as Trump's re-election triggered a sharp drop in German automakers' shares—Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, and Porsche fell 4–7 percent. This is significant as Germany's automotive industry serves as a pillar of its economy, making up 17 percent of its total exports in 2023. However, Germany's downturn is structural, not cyclical. Its industrial base struggles with high energy costs, deterring investment, and eroding global competitiveness. Moreover,

"memorial" rally, leveraging the attack to push its anti-immigration agenda ahead of the election.

**December 27, 2024:** Steinmeier dissolves parliament and sets an early election date after Olaf Scholz's government collapses.

**January 9, 2025:** candidate Alice Weidel joins Elon Musk on X for a live chat, spreading unchallenged far-right views. The appearance boosts AfD's visibility ahead of the polls.

**January 29, 2025:** After the fatal stabbing of a two-year-old boy in Aschaffenburg by an Afghan asylum seeker, the Christian Democrats under Merz pushed for a non-binding immigration crackdown bill, supported by the AfD, breaking post-war norms.

**February 12, 2025:** An Afghan asylum-seeker carried out a car-ramming attack on a trade union rally crowd, injuring 37 people and reigniting immigration debates.

**February 14 – 16, 2025:** The Munich Security Conference (MSC) takes place, highlighting Europe's need to manage its own security, as the U.S. withdraws guarantees.

**February 15, 2025:** Trump announces U.S.-Russia peace talks on Ukraine, in Saudi Arabia, without European or Ukrainian participation.

**February 16, 2025:** 30,000 people protest in Berlin under the slogan "Hand in Hand, We Are the Firewall," this comes shortly after U.S. Vice President JD Vance urged German parties to drop the "firewall" policy against the AfD during the MSC.

**February 18, 2025:** European Leaders convene at an emergency



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excessive regulations and the dismantling of bureaucratic hurdles has been a recurring feature of the debate on a possible future overhaul in Germany’s economic policy. Historically reliant on cheap Russian gas and low-cost Chinese imports, Germany’s economic model has been upended by Russia’s war in Ukraine. The economy now faces pressure to reduce dependence on both Russia and China. As Europe’s industrial powerhouse, Germany’s sluggish response—combined with fiscal austerity—risks a reverberation of economic problems across the bloc and weakening confidence in European markets. The election will go a long way toward determining whether Berlin pursues reforms or maintains the status quo.

meeting in Paris to discuss future collection action vis-a-vis Ukraine, in the wake of Trump’s alignment with Russia.

**February 19, 2025:** Trump signals plans to impose a 25 percent tariff on car imports, which could come into effect on April 2 of this year.

## KEY OUTCOMES (POSSIBLE COALITIONS)

**“GroKo” (Grand Coalition – Christian Democrats & leftist SPD):** The most probable alliance, but consensus may be difficult as the Christian Democrats have shifted further right under Merz. His push for fiscal discipline clashes with the SPD’s advocacy for increased social spending, risking gridlock on economic issues, including the pressing issue of military aid for Ukraine. Additionally, Scholz has refused to serve under Merz, meaning a new SPD leader may need to emerge, potentially fueling political infighting. Compromise would require internal reshuffling, with figures like current Defence Minister Boris Pistorius or SPD co-leader Lars Klingbeil stepping up. While Merz is open to governing with center-left parties, he has categorically ruled out collaborating with AfD and FDP.

**Black-Green Coalition (Christian Democrats & Greens):** Unprecedented at the national level but present in three states, this coalition aligns on foreign policy and defense but clashes on migration and climate policy. Merz supports strict border controls and market-based climate solutions, while the Greens favor more progressive policies. Bavarian CSU leader Markus Söder opposes working with the Greens, making this coalition unlikely but a possible bargaining tool against the SPD.

**Tripartite Coalition (Christian Democrats, SPD & FDP or Greens):** If no two-party majority emerges and the Christian Democrats underperform, a three-party coalition may be necessary, contingent on smaller parties surpassing the 5% threshold for Bundestag representation. This scenario would likely lead to political deadlock, making consensus on key policies difficult. Possible formations include the Germany coalition (Christian Democrats, SPD, FDP) or the less likely Kenya coalition (Christian Democrats, SPD, Greens). A tripartite coalition poses challenges, with a high risk of collapse similar to the previous traffic-light coalition. It could also undermine investor confidence, exacerbate economic concerns, and weaken Germany’s international standing. Ongoing political infighting would further embolden extremist parties like the AfD, which have capitalized on government paralysis to gain electoral ground.

## LATEST POLLS

### Latest Opinion Polls

- **Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU):** 30.3 percent
- **AfD:** 20.3 percent
- **SPD:** 15.4 percent
- **Grüne** 13.1 percent
- **Die Linke:** 5.8 percent
- **BSW:** 4.4 percent
- **FDP:** 4.3 percent

Source: *Wahlrecht.de/RN. February 19, 2025*

### “Which of the following candidates do you think would be best suited as Chancellor?”

- **Freidrich Merz (CDU):** 34 percent
- **Olaf Schulz (SPD):** 26 percent
- **Robert Habeck (Grüne):** 25 percent
- **Alice Weidel (AfD):** 19 percent

Source: *ARD-Deutschlandtrend. February 23, 2025*

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