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# **Analysis of the German Federal Elections 2021**

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**böll.brief – Democracy & Society** provides analyses, background information and programmatic impulses on the development of democracy and political research. We focus on the arenas of participation, the public sphere, digital change, and contemporary history.

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*Data basis: Unless otherwise stated, the analysis is based on pre-election and election day polls conducted by infratest dimap/ARD. Data on provisional election results and lists for indirect mandates have been published by the Federal Election Commissioner: <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahlen/2021.html>, (as of: Monday, 27 September 2021).*

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# 1 Introduction

Germany's federal elections were held under special auspices: With Angela Merkel's decision not to run for a fifth term, none of the parties enjoyed an incumbency bonus. Three parties ran with a candidate for Chancellor, and all of them entered their campaigns without making any commitments to possible coalitions, leaving the race wide open.

The election results show a dynamic, evolving political landscape: Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (+5.8%) and the SPD (+5.2%) achieved particularly high gains, while the CDU/CSU suffered the greatest losses (-8.5%), scoring its worst Bundestag result in its history. This solidifies the recent reality of a six-party system without any dominant parties.

Conducted about a week after the election, this analysis explores this historic election result along four structural dimensions that merit special attention in the further discussion: (1) generations and their different voting behaviors, (2) regional heterogeneity, (3) women and their political representation and (4) changes in the German Bundestag.

## 2 A closer look at age groups

**Strong support for the Greens and FDP among younger voters.** In this federal election, a particularly large number of younger voters opted for the Greens and the libertarian FDP. Their main concerns were future issues such as climate protection, education, or digitalization.

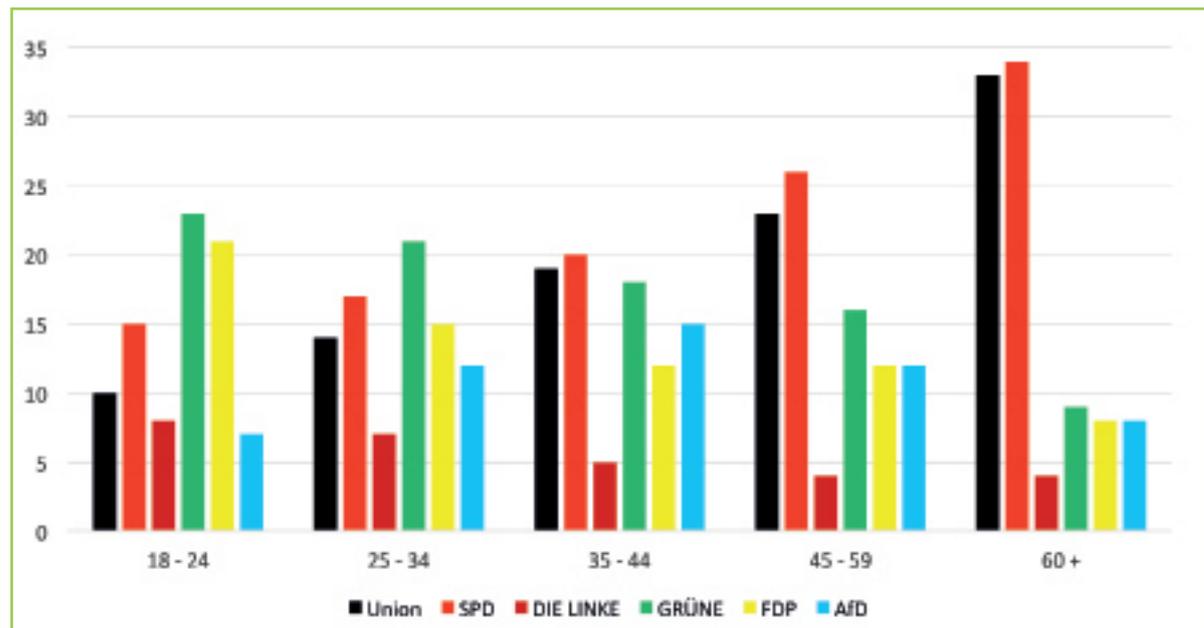
The Greens and the FDP have been relatively popular choices for first-time voters in federal elections since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> What's remarkable this time, though, is this age cohort's high level of support for these two parties combined with historically low support for the CDU and SPD, which have traditionally been the large main-stream center-right and center-left parties.

**For the first time, we observe generational differences in voting behavior of striking proportions.** The divergence in voting behaviors between younger and older voters has attained previously unseen dimensions: If it were up to the older generation (60+), the 'grand coalition' of CDU/CSU and SPD would still have a healthy majority. Among those aged 35 and under, support for this constellation is now below 30 percent.

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception was the 2013 federal election, in which the FDP, led by top candidate Rainer Brüderle, failed to even enter the Bundestag by falling short of the necessary 5%-threshold.

**Figure 1: Voting behavior by generation**



Data basis: Infratest dimap election analysis. Illustration by hbs.

**Generational issue remains a challenge for the Greens.** This election has, once again, reaffirmed the high level of support among first-time and young voters for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. The Greens also made significant gains in all age groups under 60 compared to the last federal election. However, gains among the 60-plus group were rather moderate. Any gains achieved in this age group may be due to the cohort effect—the fact that in the party’s 40-year history, Green supporters have aged alongside their party since its founding years.<sup>2</sup> Beyond that effect, efforts to reach older voters seem to have been unsuccessful. Outreach to this age group is made all the more difficult by the fact that cohort effects also apply to other parties, that party loyalty increases with age, and that older voters tend to vote more conservatively than younger ones. It is worth debating whether this ever-growing generation of older people should be left to the former mainstream parties or if it is time for a new intergenerational approach.

**A desire for fundamental change is less of a generational issue than a question of political orientation.** The number of eligible voters who want a reform of current policies and fundamental change rather than moderate course corrections has increased significantly since 2017, from 19 to 40 percent. Even though the younger generation (under 39) rates the need for fundamental change higher than the older generation (65+), the difference in that perception is not very significant (45% versus 35%).

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<sup>2</sup> This cannot be statistically verified with the data currently available.

Political affiliation is the far more decisive factor here: When asked about the need for reform in Germany, the various parties' supporters come to very different conclusions regarding the *necessity* of fundamental change. Supporters of the Green Party (62%), the left-wing Die Linke (72%), and far-right AfD (69%) would rather see fundamental change in Germany than mere course corrections or maintaining the status quo. Of course, the *political direction* of this desired change differs significantly between the parties and their supporters, which is directly reflected in their respective skillsets and priorities. Strikingly, even among Green Party supporters, just under 40% are in favor of a moderate reform course.

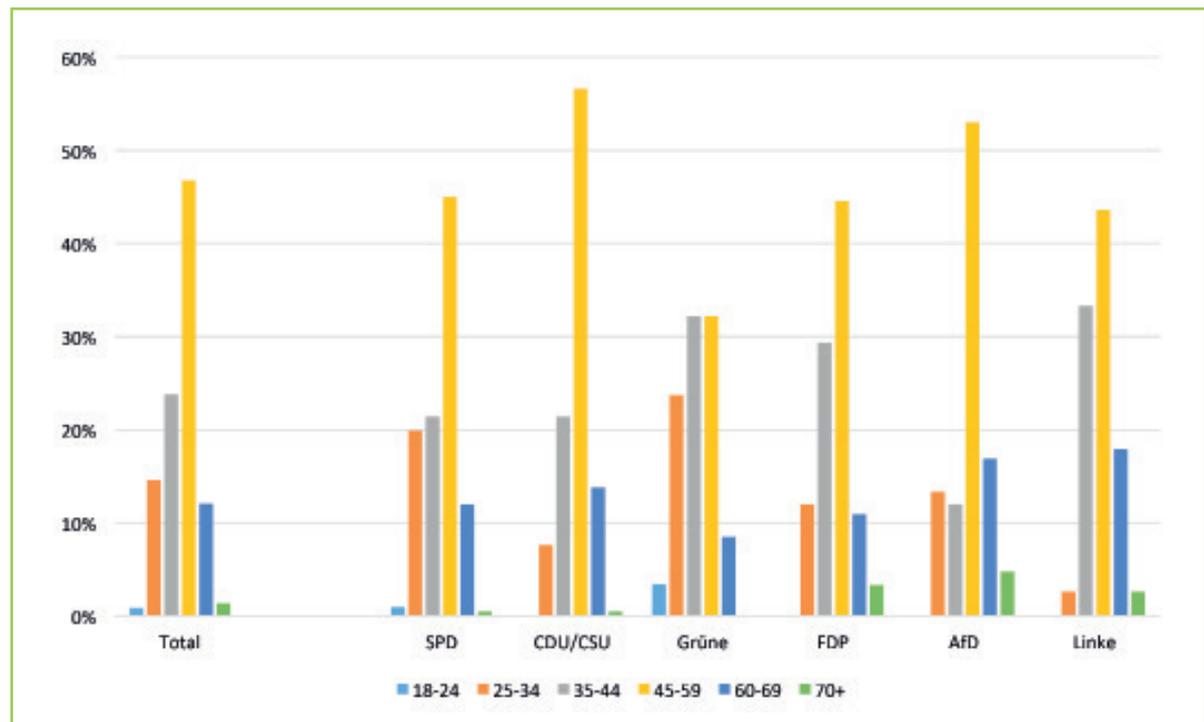
Supporters of other parties are even less inclined towards fundamental change, instead favoring a path of moderate course corrections for Germany. Specifically, 65% of FDP supporters, 60% of SPD supporters, and 72% of CDU/CSU supporters favor a moderate course to bring about social change; as many as 13% of CDU/CSU supporters do not want any change in society.

In this regard, it is impossible to tell to what extent a desire for social reform is muted by concerns about the possible negative implications of political change. Regardless of the makeup of the coalition that will ultimately form the new federal government: Political communication that addresses both stability and change is becoming more central than ever.

**Various generations in politics and in the Bundestag.** The debate on how to actively involve the younger generations in political decision-making processes and their representation in parliament is gaining momentum. This issue has been highlighted, not least, by the different voting behaviors of the various generations. In the 20th German Bundestag, the average MP is 47.5 years old, slightly younger than previously (49.4 in 2017). Overall, all age groups are represented in the Bundestag, the largest one being the 45 to 59-year-olds with 344 MPs.

**Bündnis 90/Die Grünen** have the youngest MPs with an average age of 42.6. They are also the only party in parliament that counts more MPs under the age of 45 than over 45. Four Green MPs are under 25. The **SPD** also counts 2 MPs under the age of 25 among its ranks. At 21 per cent, the SPD also has a relatively high proportion of MPs under the age of 35. In contrast, the delegation of **Die Linke** has significantly more older members. The AfD parliamentary group is the oldest with an average age of 51. The largest age group for the **CDU/CSU** is the 45-59 age range (56.6%). Only 29 percent of CDU/CSU delegates are under 45 years old.

**Figure 2: Political representation of generational diversity**



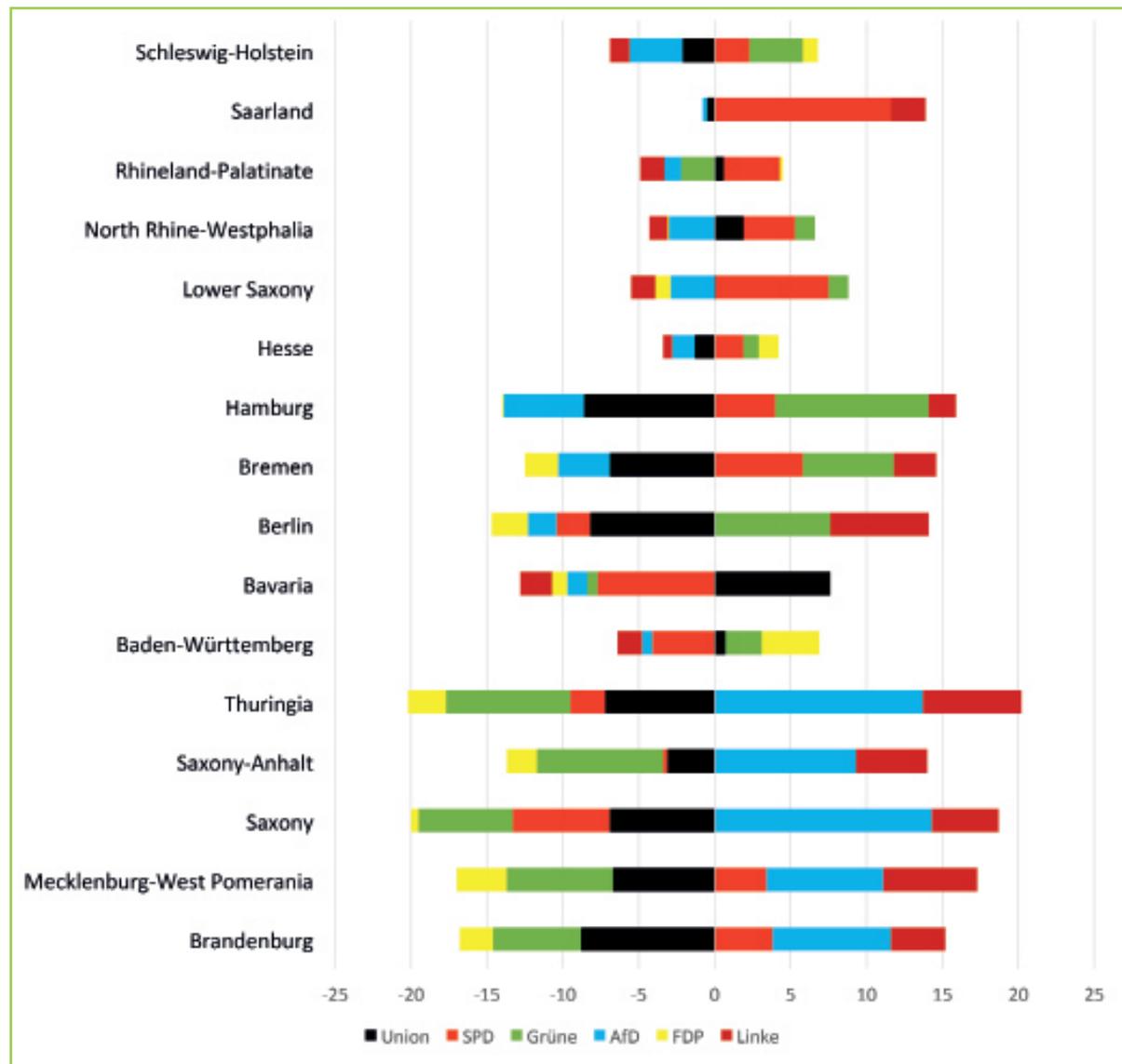
MPs of the 20th Bundestag by age cohorts. Data basis: German Bundestag. Calculations and illustration by hbs.

### 3 A closer look at regional differences

**Regional heterogeneity.** Regional differences as such are no new phenomenon, as voters have always behaved differently in different federal states of Germany. What is striking, however, is how starkly state-level results deviate from the national outcome. For example, the election result in Hesse largely matches the overall federal result, while some Eastern German states and the city-states deviate significantly.

For political actors in government and parliament, this spells tense challenges for political representation and the implementation of political projects.

**Figure 3: Election results in the federal states compared to national results**



Divergence between second-vote results in the federal states and the national result in percentage points. Data basis: Federal Election Commissioner. Calculations and illustration by hbs.

**A detailed look at second-vote results at the state level.** Voters in the city-states of Hamburg, Bremen, and Berlin leaned heavily towards the Greens, where the party scored its best results. Compared to the result of the 2017 federal election, the Greens gained votes in all federal states,<sup>3</sup> albeit with much slimmer gains in the Eastern German than in the rest of Germany.

The **SPD** emerged as the strongest force in this election, recording gains in all federal states. In Lower Saxony and Saarland, in particular, they performed particularly well in the second vote, which captures general party preference rather than direct votes for candidates. In Saarland, the SPD may have benefited from the fact that the Greens were barred from running. Only in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria did

<sup>3</sup> This does not include the Saarland, where the Greens were unable to run.

the SPD lose to the CDU/CSU, respectively. In Saxony and Thuringia, it came in second behind the AfD.

The bastions of the **CDU and CSU** are the southern German states, where they achieved their best second-vote results, as well as in North Rhine-Westphalia. However, even in these strongholds, the CDU suffered massive losses compared to 2017, particularly in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (-15.7%), which held state-level elections at the same time, reaffirming Manuela Schwesig (SPD) as Minister President.

Even though **Die Linke** scored above-average results in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Thuringia, and Berlin, it suffered massive losses in the rest of Germany, especially in its former strongholds, the Eastern German states.

The **FDP** gained votes in almost all federal states, performing particularly well in Saarland, Baden-Württemberg, and Saxony. In North Rhine-Westphalia, where it currently forms the state government in a coalition with the CDU, it suffered comparatively significant losses (-1.7%). The Eastern German states also remain a difficult terrain for the FDP, where it underperformed compared to its national results. The same applies to the city-states of Bremen and Berlin.

The **AfD** mobilized the most voters in Eastern Germany. Despite losses (-2.3%), it once again came in as the strongest force in Saxony. In Thuringia, the CDU lost to the AfD for the first time. It also picked up a few percentage points in Hamburg compared to the 2017 federal election, but still remained well below its nation-wide average. It lost votes in all other states.

**Rural areas – an unresolved challenge for the Greens.** The Greens gained votes in almost all constituencies, garnering the highest vote shares in the city-states and winning 15 of their 16 direct mandates in cities, which underlines the great importance of urban areas for the electoral success of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen.

Statistical correlations between the election results (second votes / gains and losses) and the degree of rurality of the constituencies substantiate this finding:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Simple regression analyses were calculated to determine the statistical relationship between the rurality of constituencies and election outcomes. It controlled for Eastern German states, economic strength, and proportion of older people in the constituency.

Rurality - Index of geographic location by the Thünen-Institut (Küpper, Patrick (2016): Delimitation and typification of rural areas. Braunschweig: Thünen-Institut für Ländliche Räume.) The index includes data on residential development, settlement density, agricultural land and forests, regional population potential, and accessibility of major urban centers. Rurality is stronger the lower the settlement density, the higher the proportion of detached and semi-detached houses, the higher the proportion of agricultural land and forestry areas, the lower the population potential, and the poorer the accessibility of large urban centers.

In this election, the importance of urban centers has once again increased for the Greens, who made gains not only in metropolitan areas, but also in medium-sized cities. The more rural a constituency, the weaker the Green vote. This applies, in particular, to rural regions in Eastern German states with significantly larger elderly populations than their state's or the national average.

Thus, rural areas as a whole remain an unresolved challenge for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen to grow their base across the nation. The great relevance of this structural feature for the electoral success of the Greens becomes even clearer when comparing it with the other parties' results.

Thus, the election results of SPD, FDP, and Die Linke can hardly be explained with rurality. Although the CDU suffered comparatively high losses in rural areas in this election, the CDU still does well in rural constituencies in the West of Germany. However, the urban-rural dimension is a less decisive factor for the CDU's election results than the Greens'.

While the urban-rural dimension does not explain the AfD's last federal election results, this election shows growing indications that this structural feature is gaining relevance. The AfD is able to maintain its strength in rather rural regions with an above-average number of older people, in particular.<sup>5</sup> This structural correlation applies to the entire Federal Republic and should be taken as a warning sign not to focus solely on the AfD's second-vote results in the Eastern German states.

## 4 A closer look at women

**CDU suffers heavy losses among women voters.** In the past, the CDU/CSU performed particularly well with women voters. In this election, however, they lost among women, in particular. This may be due to a "Merkel effect", i.e. that CDU/CSU support used to be strongly linked to the Chancellor. This election is also showing familiar patterns according to which men lean more towards AfD and FDP, and women tend to vote more for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. These differences are particularly striking among first-time and young voters: While young female first-time voters were particularly likely to vote for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (26%, +10%), the FDP was particularly popular with young male voters (27%, +12%).

**Other socio-demographic factors show continuity** Unlike generational differences, other socio-demographic factors continue to follow familiar patterns. As in previous elections, the SPD and CDU appeal to voters of all educational levels, with slightly stronger support amongst voters with lower degrees of formal education. Voters with high levels of formal education continue to disproportionately support the

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<sup>5</sup> The basis for comparison here is the deviation from the average age in a given federal state.

Greens. This strong backing for the Greens among academics has increased again in this election. The self-employed tend to vote CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, and Greens, with only a small portion of self-employed voters supporting the AfD and Die Linke. The role of civil servants among the voter base is shifting. In this group, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen have made gains and are now a third significant political force alongside CDU and SPD. Among blue collar workers, SPD, AfD, and CDU remain strong.

**Political representation of women in the Bundestag has slightly increased.** In the new parliament, the proportion of female MPs has increased slightly (+3.2%). Overall, however, women remain significantly underrepresented in the Bundestag at 34.7%. At this rate of change, equal descriptive representation of men and women in the Bundestag won't be achieved until 2041.

With their increased parliamentary strength, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen are a significant driver for a positive change in the political representation of women. At 58.5%, they have the highest proportion of women of any parliamentary group, including the first two trans women to ever enter the German Bundestag. Overall, there are more female members in the Green parliamentary group than in the CDU, CSU, and FDP combined.

Similar to the Greens, Die Linke consistently puts female candidates on list positions that are likely to result in a Bundestag mandate. Die Linke thus has just under 50% male MPs. SPD ranks third in terms of gender-balanced political representation, although it now counts slightly fewer women in its ranks than in the previous term.

The case of the CDU/CSU, in particular, highlights how a failure to place women candidates on promising list ranks, or a lack of women candidates running for direct mandates negatively affects chances for improved political representation for women.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more details, see: Stefanie John and Jette Bergen (2021): Chancen auf eine bessere Repräsentation von Frauen im Bundestag nach der Wahl 2021? Available at: [https://www.boell.de/de/2021/09/21/chancen-auf-eine-bessere-repraesentation-von-frauen-im-bundestag-nach-der-wahl-2021?dimension1=division\\_btw21](https://www.boell.de/de/2021/09/21/chancen-auf-eine-bessere-repraesentation-von-frauen-im-bundestag-nach-der-wahl-2021?dimension1=division_btw21)

**Table 1: Political representation of women**

	Candidates			Elected Officials			Change from the previous Bundestag (percent)
	Total	Women	% Women	Men	Women	% Women	
<b>CDU/CSU</b>	607	245	<b>40.4</b>	150	46	<b>23.5</b>	2.7
<b>SPD</b>	442	192	<b>43.4</b>	120	86	<b>41.7</b>	-2.3
<b>AfD</b>	340	41	<b>12.1</b>	72	11	<b>13.3</b>	4.0
<b>FDP</b>	381	91	<b>23.9</b>	70	22	<b>23.9</b>	0.2
<b>Die Linke</b>	350	134	<b>38.3</b>	18	21	<b>53.8</b>	0.2
<b>Grüne</b>	445	241	<b>54.2</b>	49	69	<b>58.5</b>	1.8
<b>SSW</b>	14	7	<b>50.0</b>	1	0	<b>0.0</b>	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2579</b>	<b>951</b>	<b>36.87</b>	<b>480</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>34.7</b>	<b>3.2</b>

Only parties represented in the 20th German Bundestag. Candidates (total, adjusted for double candidates; absolute, percentage shares) and MPs in the Bundestag after the election (preliminary final result). Data basis: Federal Election Commissioner and German Bundestag. Calculations and illustration by hbs.

## 5 A closer look at parliament

### The new size of the Bundestag continues to underscore the need for reform.

In its new composition, the Bundestag will increase to 735 members. Even though that is only 26 MPs more than the previous Bundestag, it clearly overshoots the target size of about 600 MPs. This impairs the parliament's functioning, means additional cost, and might weaken confidence in this political institution. Prior to the election, there had been concern that there might be even more MPs, which did not materialize, especially due to the large number of Green direct mandates.

The inflation of seats in the Bundestag is due to current electoral law.<sup>7</sup> As it turned out, and as many expected, its last minor revision, passed by the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition in previous legislative term, failed to solve the problem.

The need for reform arises, in particular, from the distribution of Bavarian direct mandates. The CDU's sister party CSU, which only exists in the federal state of

<sup>7</sup> In principle, the Bundestag is determined in a two-vote, personal, proportional election. The first vote elects a candidate for each constituency, who will represent it as a directly elected MP in the Bundestag. This means that in each constituency, the candidate who is "first past the post" wins the mandate with a relative majority of votes. Currently, 299 MPs were directly elected in this way.

The actual ratio of parliamentary groups in the Bundestag, however, results from the second vote. With their second vote, voters opt for lists of candidates which are drawn up by the parties in each state. Ideally, the second vote results in roughly the same number of seats as the direct mandates. If a party wins more mandates via the first, direct vote than it would be entitled to according to its share of second votes, this results in so-called overhang mandates, meaning that this party will be represented in the Bundestag by MPs with direct mandates only and their state lists will be irrelevant. The resulting imbalance must now be equalized by awarding compensatory mandates to the other parties represented in the Bundestag.

Bavaria, holds a share of only 5.2% of the vote nation-wide, yet won 45 constituencies directly in its home state, resulting in 11 overhang mandates. These have to be compensated by allocating additional seats to the other parliamentary groups.

The most recently introduced special regulation provides that up to 3 overhang mandates not be considered in the compensation process. In theory, two parties could therefore have the same share of the vote, but a different number of seats. The procedure, which is already questionable in democratic terms alone, is very likely to be put to the test in the coming legislative period. When the compromise was struck in October 2020, it was already announced that a reform commission consisting of scholars and MPs would further revise electoral law by 2023.

**Prospects for a reform of electoral law depend on the constellation of the in-coming government.** In July 2020, the parliamentary groups of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP and Die Linke introduced a joint proposal to the Bundestag which, among other things, envisaged reducing the number of constituencies from 299 to 250. Even in extreme scenarios, that would mean significantly fewer overhang mandates that need to be equalized. A Bundestag of more than 1,000 deputies, as would be conceivable under current electoral law, would no longer be possible.

**New momentum, driven by newcomers.** A large share of incoming MPs is new to the Bundestag (282 MPs, or 38%).<sup>8</sup> The proportion of new MPs results both from gains in parliamentary seats and a high level of fluctuation in the parliamentary groups. For example, more than half of Green and SPD MPs are new members. About 30% of FDP and AfD MPs are new to the Bundestag, and the incoming CDU/CSU parliamentary group will have a quarter of new members, despite its losses. The much-reduced Linke parliamentary group will count eight new members (20%).

Depending on the proportion of new members in each parliamentary group, it will take them some time to find their bearings as the new legislative term gets underway, since new members must first familiarize themselves with parliamentary and party-specific procedures. However, a high proportion of newbies holds opportunities as well as challenges: Since they have not yet been institutionally professionalized, newcomers have an easier time implementing a new political style, a benefit that is often mentioned in connection with possible new coalition models.

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<sup>8</sup> Compared to the composition of the 19th Bundestag.

# The Author

**Stefanie John** has been a head of for politics and party research since November 2020.

She studied political science (FU-Berlin) and business administration (Berufsakademie Berlin) and holds a PhD in political science.

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