ISSUE BRIEF

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The New Political Reality: Germany's Electoral Shifts and the Challenge of Far-Right Populism

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

Introduction

In recent years, Germany's political landscape has experienced subtle yet significant shifts. The rise of far-right political forces has become a focal point for both domestic and international observers. While Germany has long been viewed as a bastion of liberal democracy and a central pillar of the European Union, recent elections have underscored the challenges that come with increasing polarization. This Issue Brief examines the dynamics of recent electoral outcomes, the incremental ascent of far-right parties, and the potential implications these trends may have on Germany's internal cohesion and foreign policy posture.

➢ Electoral Dynamics and the Far-Right's Ascendance

Shifting Voter Behavior and the Emergence of the Alternative for Deutschland (AfD)

Over the past decade, traditional parties—such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Greens—have faced mounting challenges from voters disillusioned by globalization, rapid societal changes, and economic uncertainties.[1] In this environment, the AfD

[1] Riham Alkousaa, "Resurgence of Germany's Left exposes fragmented, polarised electorate", Reuters, published February 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/resurgence-germanys-left-exposes-fragmented-polarised-electorate-2025-02-25/

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(Alternative for Deutschland) and other far-right groups have capitalized on disenchantment[2] by offering simple narratives that address complex issues like immigration, national identity, and sovereignty. Recent state and federal elections have shown that while these parties still represent a minority of the overall vote (See Figure 1)[3], they are slowly but steadily increasing their foothold in regional parliaments (See Figure 2).[4] This trend has not only shifted the policy debate but has also forced mainstream parties to reconsider their platforms and messaging.[5]

German election 2025 results

Intermediate result (second votes): 299 of 299 constituency results received

	Party	Vote share (%)	Votes	Vote share (2021)
	CDU/CSU	28.6%	14,158,432	24.1%
	AfD	20.8%	10,327,148	10.4%
	SPD	16.4%	8,148,284	25.7%
	Greens	11.6%	5,761,476	14.7%
	Left	8.8%	4,355,382	4.9%
	BSW	4.97%	2,468,670	0.0%
	FDP	4.3%	2,148,878	11.4%

Source: Federal Returning Officer

[2] Lena Schorlemer, "Germany's Far-right AfD Doubles Vote Share and Reshape Germany's Political Landscape", Wilson Center, published February 25, 2025. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/germanys-far-right-afd-doubles-vote-share-and-reshapes-germanys-political-landscape

[3] Hanna Duggal, "Charting the rise of Germany's far-right AfD party", Aljazeera, published on February 23, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/24/charting-the-rise-of-germanys-far-right-afd-party

[4] Hanna Duggal, "Charting the rise of Germany's far-right AfD party", Aljazeera, published on February 23, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/24/charting-the-rise-of-germanys-far-right-afd-party

[5] Sophia Besch & Saskia Berchenmacher, "For Years, Germany Has Looked Inward. Its Next Leader Doesn't Have That Luxury", Carnegie Endowment, published on February 25, 2025. https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/02/germany-election-merz-afd-defense-ukraine?lang=en

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Figure 1

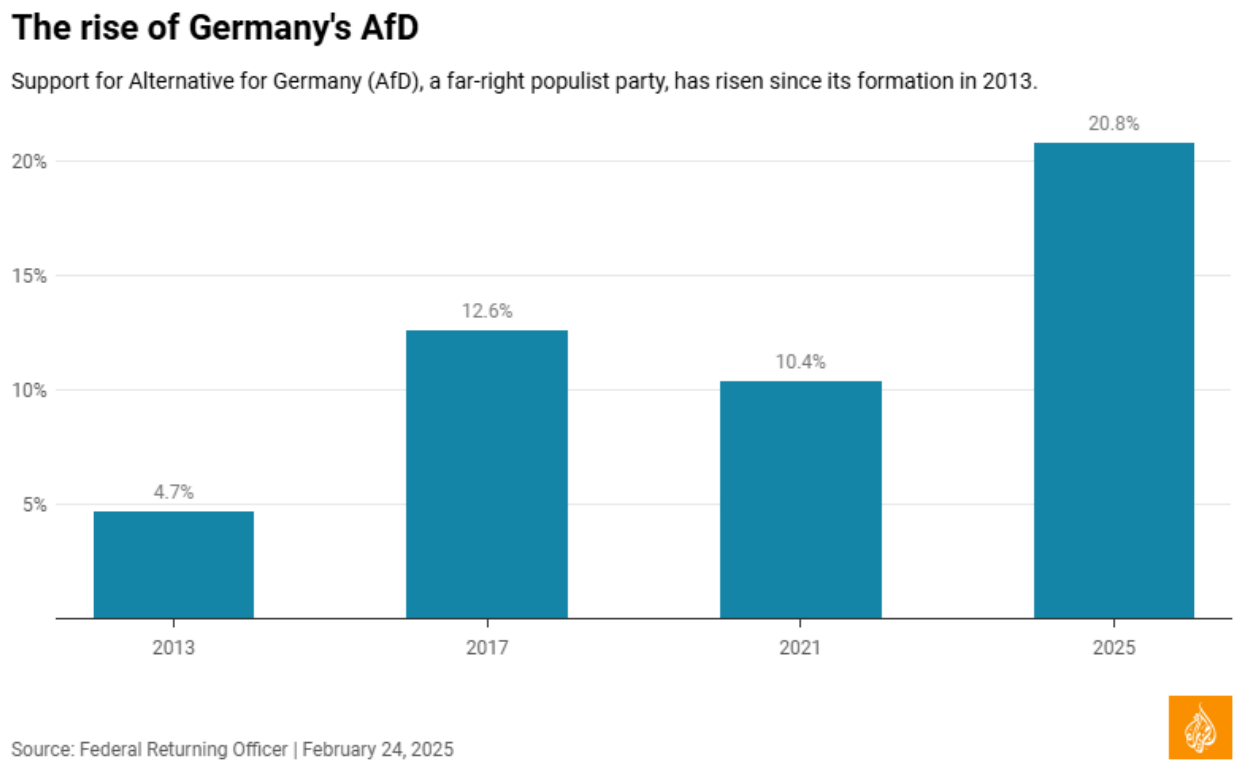

Figure 2

Electoral Outcomes: A Gradual yet Concerning Trend

Recent electoral cycles have demonstrated that far-right parties are gaining traction, particularly in regions experiencing economic stagnation and demographic changes (See Figure 3[6]). In some states, local elections have seen the AfD garner a vote share that, while not enough to secure governance outright, has given them considerable influence in coalition talks and legislative debates. The growth of these parties is often tied to strategic communication that leverages historical narratives, nationalist sentiment, and criticism of the European Union's policies. Consequently, even as these groups remain outside the core of government formation, their presence is reshaping political discourse.

6 Hanna Duggal, "Charting the rise of Germany's far-right AfD party", Aljazeera, published on February 23, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/24/charting-the-rise-of-germanys-far-right-afd-party

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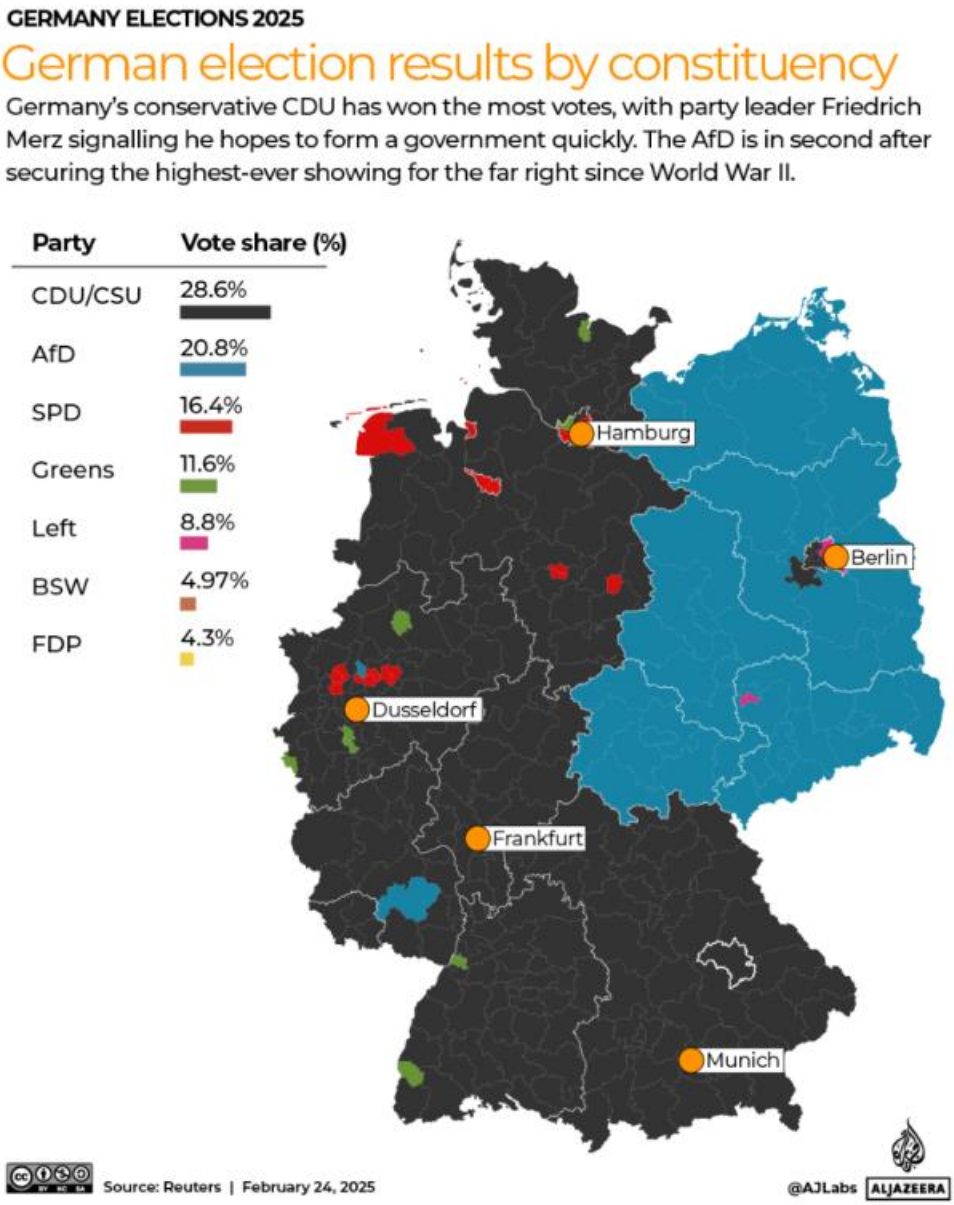

Figure 3

- **Domestic Implications**

Political Polarization and Policy Shifts

One of the immediate consequences of the far-right's growing popularity is increased polarization within the German political arena. Mainstream parties find themselves compelled to adjust their rhetoric to prevent losing voters to more extreme alternatives. For instance, debates on immigration have taken on a sharper tone, with centrist parties at times adopting stricter stances to recapture

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disenfranchised electorates.[7] Such shifts, though often moderate compared to the AfD's proposals, inadvertently serve to legitimize hardline perspectives and fuel further polarization.

The debate over national identity, too, has become more pronounced. Far-right narratives emphasize traditional German values and historical continuity,[8] often contrasting them with what they perceive as the negative impacts of multiculturalism and supranational governance.[9] This recalibration can lead to policy proposals that focus on strengthening state sovereignty and reasserting cultural homogeneity—positions that may alienate minority communities and further fragment the social fabric.

Challenges in Coalition Building and Institutional Trust

Germany's political system, built on coalition governments, faces new complexities as a result of these emerging dynamics. Traditional parties have historically shunned direct cooperation with far-right factions, yet their electoral performance cannot be ignored. This creates a dilemma: while coalition partners remain ideologically opposed to the far-right, the need to build majority governments forces them to adopt a more centrist or even hardline stance on issues like immigration and law enforcement. The resulting tension complicates governance and may lead to policy gridlock or compromise on core democratic principles.

Furthermore, the rise of extremist voices contributes to a broader erosion of trust in political institutions. As citizens perceive the political center as losing its grip on key issues, skepticism about the efficacy of democratic governance increases. This situation not only weakens the legitimacy of elected officials but also creates fertile ground for populist rhetoric that further undermines institutional confidence.

- **Foreign Policy Repercussions**

Erosion of Germany's Global Image

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7 Paul Hockenos, "The AfD Is Now Germany's Mainstream", Foreign Policy, published February 24, 2025. https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/24/afd-german-election-weidel-opposition-mainstream/

8 "MANIFESTO FOR GERMANY – The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany", Official website of the AfD, accessed on February 25, 2025. https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf

9 Jeffrey Gedmin, "Right-wing populism in Germany: Muslims and minorities after the 2015 refugee crisis", Brookings Institute, published July 24, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/right-wing-populism-in-germany-muslims-and-minorities-after-the-2015-refugee-crisis/

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For decades, Germany has been at the forefront of promoting human rights, multilateralism, and international cooperation. Its foreign policy has reflected a commitment to a 'rules-based' international order, which has, in turn, bolstered its reputation within the European Union and on the world stage. However, as far-right sentiment gains traction domestically, there is a risk that this international posture will be compromised. Nationalist and protectionist rhetoric, which often accompanies far-right agendas, can lead to a retrenchment from international commitments and a reluctance to engage in multilateral initiatives.

A more inward-looking Germany could shift the balance of power within the EU, reducing its capacity to serve as a stabilizing force in European and global affairs. As debates over sovereignty and national identity intensify, the traditional role of Germany as a mediator and champion of European integration may diminish. This shift could have ripple effects, potentially undermining EU solidarity on issues ranging from climate change to security policy.

Strategic Reorientations and Global Security Implications

A far-right-influenced foreign policy is already prompting Germany to re-evaluate its strategic alignments. Historically, Germany has been a staunch ally of the United States and a key player in NATO. However, a pivot towards nationalism is creating openings for alternative alliances—or at least a more ambiguous stance regarding traditional partners. Germany increasingly appears open to recalibrating its relations with emerging global powers such as Russia and China, both of which have, at times, aligned rhetorically and ideologically with far-right movements in Europe.

These shifts are not solely driven by internal political dynamics; they are also shaped by significant external developments. With Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office, longstanding transatlantic assumptions are being challenged once again. His administration's transactional approach to alliances and scepticism toward NATO are raising concerns in Berlin about the reliability of the U.S. as a strategic partner. Meanwhile, evolving U.S.-Russia relations—marked by fluctuating engagement and tension—add another layer of uncertainty, particularly as the war in Ukraine continues to reshape the European security landscape.

Amid these dynamics, Germany's Chancellor-in-waiting, Friedrich Merz, has articulated a vision for enhanced European defence autonomy.[10] He has questioned the future viability of NATO in its

[10] "Germany's Merz wants European nuclear weapons to boost US shield", Reuters, published March 9, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-merz-wants-european-nuclear-weapons-boost-us-shield-2025-03-09/

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current form, suggesting that Europe must rapidly develop independent defence capabilities.[11] Merz stated, "After Donald Trump's statements last week...it is clear that this government does not care much about the fate of Europe." He further emphasized the urgency of strengthening Europe to achieve "independence from the USA" in defense matters.[12]

In a landmark move, Merz has secured parliamentary approval for a €500 billion investment fund aimed at modernizing infrastructure and bolstering military capabilities over the next decade.[13] This initiative represents a significant departure from Germany's traditional fiscal conservatism and underscores a commitment to enhancing European security frameworks.

Furthermore, Merz has proposed initiating discussions with France and the United Kingdom regarding the extension of their nuclear deterrents to Germany, reflecting a strategic pivot towards greater self-reliance in defence. He remarked, "We should talk with both countries...always also from the perspective of supplementing the American nuclear shield, which we of course want to see maintained."

Amid these dynamics, Germany finds itself in a position where maintaining strategic autonomy becomes increasingly important. As cohesion within NATO faces renewed strain, Berlin may adopt a more multipolar foreign policy orientation, seeking flexibility in its global partnerships. Even if gradual, such a realignment introduces greater complexity and unpredictability to Germany's international role. A weakening transatlantic alliance not only emboldens rival actors but also alters the strategic calculus in Europe, especially in regions bordering Eastern Europe. The long-term consequences of these shifts could extend well beyond immediate policy debates, potentially reconfiguring the balance of power in a post-Cold War Europe.

Conclusion

The recent electoral developments in Germany signal a potentially transformative moment in the country's political evolution. The incremental rise of far-right parties, exemplified by the AfD, reflects broader societal tensions—economic, cultural, and political—that challenge the established

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11 "Likely next German chancellor Merz questions NATO's future in 'current form'", Reuters, published February 24, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-merz-questions-longevity-natos-current-form-2025-02-23/

12 Tim Ross and Nette Nöstlinger, "Germany's Merz vows 'independence' from Trump's America, warning NATO may soon be dead", Politico, published February 23, 2025. https://www.politico.eu/article/friedrich-merz-germany-election-united-states-donald-trump-nato/

13 Geir Moulson, "Germany's likely next leader wins parliament's backing for huge defense and infrastructure spending", AP News, published updated March 18, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/germany-merz-parliament-defense-infrastructure-6744e76078d220b105e42c94cb128d0a

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order. Domestically, these shifts contribute to greater polarization, complicate coalition politics, and erode trust in traditional institutions. Internationally, the implications are equally significant. A more inward-looking Germany, influenced by nationalist and protectionist agendas, risks compromising its longstanding role as a promoter of multilateralism and a stabilizing force within the European Union.

While the far-right's ascendancy remains relatively marginal in absolute terms, its growing influence on public discourse and policy debates cannot be dismissed. The normalization of extreme positions poses a real challenge to the liberal democratic values that have defined Germany's post-war identity. As the country navigates the complex internal and external dynamics, the evolution of its political and security landscape will likely have profound implications both at home and on the global stage.

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