

Success for the AfD and the BSW in Thuringia and Saxony

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In the Thuringia elections held on 1 September, the pro-Russian and anti-immigrant AfD emerged as the leading party, marking its first victory in a *Landtag* election. The party secured 32.8% of the vote, a significant increase of 9.4 percentage points compared to the 2019 election, which translated into 32 seats in the 88-seat parliament. The CDU came second with 23.6% of the vote (+1.9 percentage points; 23 seats). The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), contesting a *Landtag* election for the first time, secured third place (15.8% of the vote; 15 seats), and Die Linke, which had previously governed this federal state, came fourth (13.1%; -17.9 percentage points; 12 seats). The SPD also managed to retain representation in Thuringia's parliament, garnering 6.1% of the vote, (-2.1 percentage points; 6 seats).

In Saxony, which borders Poland, the CDU, that has ruled this federal state since 1990, came first with 31.9% of the vote (-0.2 percentage point; 41 seats) in the 120-seat parliament. The AfD garnered 30.6% of the vote (+3.1 percentage points; 40 seats). The BSW came third with 11.8% of the vote (15 seats). The SPD and the Greens, which until recently co-governed this federal state, received 7.3% (-0.4 percentage points; 10 seats) and 5.1% (-3.5 percentage points; 7 seats) of the vote, respectively. Other parties which crossed the electoral threshold include Die Linke (4.5%; -5.9 percentage points; 6 seats) and Free Voters (2.2%; 1 seat). However, their results will not alter the balance of power in the Bundesrat.

The elections mainly focused on issues such as curbing migration and halting support to Ukraine, with both the AfD and the BSW backing these proposals. The anticipated poor performance of Germany's ruling coalition parties has exacerbated the ongoing disputes within Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government and further weakened his position.

In both federal states, the process of forming a coalition is expected to be prolonged. Thuringia's constitution does not set a specific deadline for appointing the state's new minister-president. Although both the AfD and the CDU have announced the initiation of coalition talks, the reluctance of other parties to cooperate with the AfD suggests that the Christian Democrats are likely to form Thuringia's new government. A minority coalition comprising the CDU, the BSW, and the SPD is also possible, and may be tolerated by Die Linke. In Saxony, the deadline for forming the new government is the end of January 2025. The most likely outcome is a coalition between the CDU, the BSW, and the SPD.

Commentary

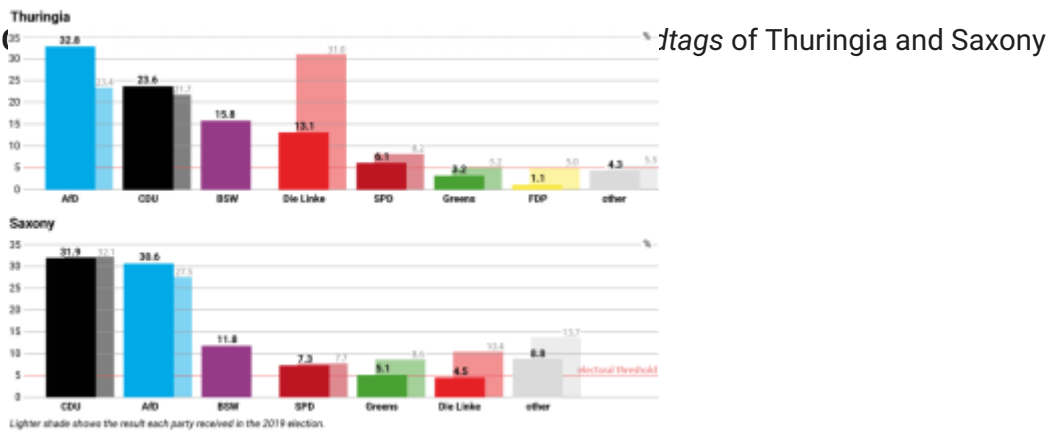
- **The pro-Russian and anti-immigrant BSW is the biggest winner of the recent election,** as it has managed to secure a significant position in both federal states despite lacking

well-developed party-structures (see 'Germany: the launch of the pro-Russian Wagenknecht party'). The party, established only in January 2024, will be a crucial element in the formation of future coalitions. The BSW largely owes its success to its leader Sahra Wagenknecht, who is popular—particularly in the eastern federal states—charismatic, and formerly a leader of Die Linke. The party has mainly attracted voters who previously supported Die Linke, capturing around 160,000 across both federal states. Its campaign focused on issues of national importance, such as the proposal to halt support to Ukraine and to curb migration. During the campaign, Wagenknecht made the BSW's participation in any future government conditional on reducing support to Kyiv. Although Germany's federal states do not have separate foreign policies, proposals for 'peaceful diplomatic initiatives' could enhance the party's popularity ahead of the 2025 Bundestag election. In addition to halting support to Ukraine, Wagenknecht advocates for Germany to focus on ending the war between Russia and Ukraine through diplomatic means. While the BSW's leaders have ruled out any coalition with AfD, they may consider supporting certain proposals from far-right parties, such as reducing social welfare payments to refugees. In both Thuringia and Saxony, the BSW has female leaders (Katja Wolf and Sabine Zimmermann respectively), who are former Die Linke politicians with moderate views.

- **The AfD's success primarily stems from its ability to persuade voters of the merits of its platform**, rather than from directly challenging the platforms of other parties. On key issues such as security policy, curbing migration, social affairs, and advocating for the interests of residents in Germany's eastern regions at the federal level, voters perceive the AfD as the most competent party. The record-high voter turnout also played in its favour (74.4% in Saxony, +7.8 percentage points; in Thuringia 73.6%, +8.7 percentage points), as it helped to mobilise former non-voters. Despite being under surveillance by Germany's counterintelligence and facing isolation from other parties and the media, the AfD has solidified its status as a mass party in the eastern federal states, enjoying popularity across all voter groups. A successful online campaign further boosted its appeal among younger voters, making it the most popular party among those aged 18–24 in both federal states.
- **In Thuringia, the AfD secured enough votes to block certain decisions that require a two-thirds majority**, such as appointing new Constitutional Court justices, amending the federal state's constitution, and electing members of the secret services committee. This strengthens the party's position and presents opportunities to form temporary coalitions, for instance with the BSW, regarding specific issues. This situation may prompt efforts to amend the constitutions of other federal states, as well as the federal republic's constitution, to protect the Constitutional Courts from the AfD's influence (see '[A general rehearsal: strategies to contain the AfD](#)').
- **The recent elections in the eastern federal states should be interpreted as a vote of no confidence in the Scholz government.** In Thuringia and Saxony, the SPD experienced its worst results since Germany's reunification. This defeat for the ruling parties is likely to exacerbate existing tensions within the coalition. If the SPD loses the upcoming election in Brandenburg, scheduled for 22 September, (current polls indicate 19% support for the SPD, with the AfD leading at 24%), the debate regarding Scholz's candidacy for chancellor

in next year’s Bundestag election will likely intensify. In this context, it is possible that discussions about an early federal election could arise, especially if the leaders of the SPD, the Greens, and the FDP conclude that this option would be more advantageous than continuing with an increasingly unpopular coalition.

APPENDIX



Source: the author’s own analysis based on figures published by the federal states’ electoral committees.

Chart 2. Division of seats in the *Landtags* of Thuringia and Saxony

