



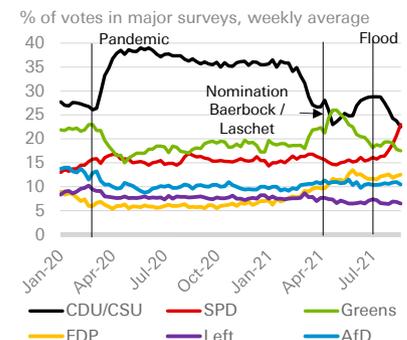
German elections: Kitchen table polling stations are open

- Polls are in flux. The SPD – pulled up by popular frontrunner FM Scholz – has exploited the conservatives’ ongoing weakness and turned a seemingly hopeless endeavour into a neck-and-neck race. In parallel, the Greens are stumbling. In the midst of this volatile political atmosphere, postal voting has started. As most postal voters intend to cast their vote quickly, there is little time left for the faltering conservatives and Greens to regain voters’ support.
- Moreover, a veritable postal vote boom is expected for this year’s federal election. While postal voting has already become increasingly popular (in 2017 29% of voters used that option), the pandemic has made it a safe alternative for voters. Recent regional elections have seen the postal voting share double, a trend that could also emerge on a federal level. Still, the German voting system (and postal services) appears to be well prepared for an increase in postal voting.

Election campaigns in full swing as voters start to cast postal ballots. In fact, the German federal election has already begun with postal votes being cast now every day until the elections day on September 26. This changes campaign dynamics to a certain extent. Rather than just focusing on the final days, parties have already intensified their campaigns in an attempt to mobilize for postal voting. However, the increasingly popular postal vote is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, every postal vote won is secured no matter what happens up to the elections. For example, when just days before regional elections in March, allegations emerged of some CDU MPs being involved in questionable mask procurement deals, postal votes already cast may have saved the CDU from an even bigger defeat in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. On the other hand, every postal vote lost to another party cannot be won back. Especially, the faltering conservatives and the Greens with their stumbling chancellor candidates have little time left to convince (postal) voters that they are the right choice after all (see Figures 1 and 2). Meanwhile, the upswing seems to have come just in time for the SPD. Their increasingly popular chancellor candidate, FM Scholz, is smiling at voters from billboards with a postal ballot in his hand. Though 60% of postal voters intend to return the postal ballot as soon as they receive it (University of Hohenheim and Forsa¹), some might wait for the candidates’ TV debates to make their decision (see Figure 3).

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Figure 1: Polls of polls – the SPD is gaining momentum



Note: * major political surveys taken into account: Allensbach, Kantar, Forsa, FG Wahlen, Infratest, INSA.
Source: Wahlrecht.de, Deutsche Bank



¹ University of Hohenheim and Forsa, Bundestagswahl 2021: Wahlkampf, Stimmung, Meinungen, August 2021



Boom in postal vote expected

Pandemic amplifies the upward trend in postal voting. In Germany, voting at the ballot box is the standard, while postal voting, though open to all voters, is only possible on request (since 2009 without justification). Nevertheless, postal voting has become more popular and more widely used over the last two decades (see Figure 4). Especially the convenience of filling out the ballot at any time and at home makes postal voting attractive in an increasingly mobile society. The pandemic has made postal voting even more attractive, especially for voters concerned about their health or not keen to abide by strict sanitary rules at the polling stations. For example, in the regional elections held in March during the build-up of the 3rd pandemic wave, the share of postal votes doubled in Baden-Wuerttemberg (51.3% vs 21% in 2016) and Rhineland-Palatinate (65.9% vs 30.6% in 2016). A similar increase was also seen in the June election in Saxony-Anhalt, though at a lower level (29.1% vs. 15.9% in 2016), as postal voting is generally less prevalent in Eastern Germany. The Federal Returning Officer is expecting a similar development for the upcoming federal elections (Spiegel, August 16). This does not seem far-fetched, given that in a recent poll 39% of voters stated their intention to opt for postal vote (41% ballot box vote, 19% not yet decided; University of Hohenheim and Forsa). In view of the pandemic, it is not surprising that especially voters aged 60+ seem to prefer postal voting (46% in this group say that they will cast a postal vote, while it is 31-34% in younger age groups).

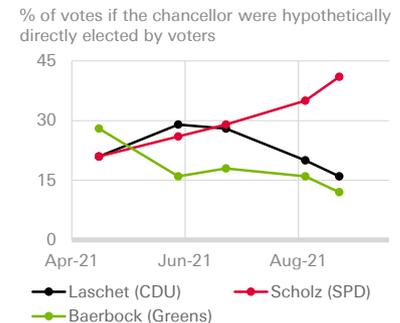
The German postal voting system appears to be well prepared for the expected increase in postal voters – both in terms of organizing the participation as well as the speed of delivering reliable election results. Although the Federal Returning Officer points out that the counting of postal votes is a bit more time consuming, he is optimistic that the preliminary results will be published during the night of the elections day or early the next morning (Spiegel, August 16). The Federal German Post Office today also stressed that it has increased capacities and is now prepared to deal with postal voting increasing up to 60%. Thus, developments observed in the context of the US election last year – especially any allegations of voter fraud – can be ruled out for Germany.

Increased share of postal voters makes the projection of the election result via exit polls more demanding. First projections (so-called *Hochrechnungen*) of the election results are published on TV after the closing of the polling stations at 6pm. They are mainly based on exit polls, i.e. interviews with voters after they have left the polling station (the process to arrive at these projections is a bit more complex, though). Exit polls do not cover postal voters. However, given their number and slightly different voting patterns, they are relevant for assessing the election result. Their votes are counted simultaneously with the ballot box votes. More reliable are thus the polling forecasts (based on votes counted) presented in the course of the evening. In the event of a close result, the provisional result, expected to be published later at night or in the morning, will provide clarity on the distribution of seats and, by that, majorities in the Bundestag.

Who are the postal voters and what is their impact on the election?

Postal voters not that different from in-person voters. It appears that voters make different use of postal voting as their profile differs slightly from ballot box voters (see Figure 5). For example, the CDU/CSU had 4.9pp higher share in postal votes than in ballot box votes in the 2017 federal elections, while for the AfD it was 4.3pp lower. These differences can mainly be explained by postal voters being older voters with higher incomes, typically pensioners, self-employed but also students, mostly

Figure 2: Scholz tops the popularity ranking



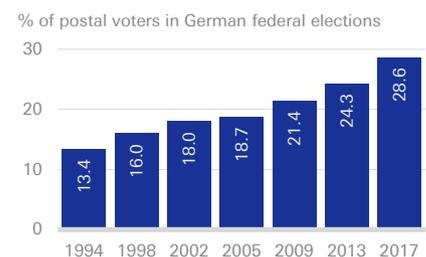
Source: ARD Deutschlandtrend, Deutsche Bank

Figure 3: TV debates ahead of the federal elections

Date	Channel	Participants
Aug 29	RTL/n.tv	Debate with all 3 chancellor candidates
Sept 1	Pro7	Annalena Baerbock (Greens)
Sept 12	ARD/ZDF	Debate with all 3 chancellor candidates
Sept 15	Pro7	Olaf Scholz (SPD)
Sept 19	Pro7/Sat1/Kabel 1	Debate with all 3 chancellor candidates
Sept 23	ARD/ZDF	Debate with the lead candidates of all Bundestag parties
Sept 26	Federal Elections	

Source: Spiegel, August 19

Figure 4: More and more voters use the option of postal voting



Source: Federal Returning Officer

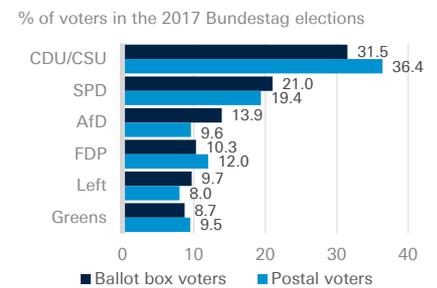


living in urban areas and in Western Germany. It is rather surprising, but also encouraging in view of the hurdle the application requirement could pose to some voters, that education seems to have no clear influence on the propensity to vote by post. More importantly, postal voters are not only core voters with strong party ties. Also frequent non-voters opt for postal voting. In the 2017 federal elections, they accounted for about 25% of postal voters,² a noteworthy proportion. For Germany, there is no evidence that postal voters have clearly different attitudes or political preferences than ballot box voters.

Bottom line. Postal voters and ballot box voters do not differ fundamentally in the way they make their voting decision. Against the background of dwindling party affiliations, both groups give increasing weight to short-term drivers like the election campaign and the image of the candidates when making their vote (see [our analysis on tipping the scale in a tight election](#)). This is reflected in the increasingly volatile polls where currently the SPD pulled up by their popular frontrunner Scholz seems to have gained momentum just in time for the election. Still, as polls are not set in stone, the only fair conclusion on today's perspective seems to be that a three-way party coalition will be needed to achieve a majority in the Bundestag, with a CDU-led Jamaica or a SPD-led traffic-light coalition the most likely scenarios.

We thank Ursula Walther for her valuable contribution.

Figure 5: Parties' vote shares differ between postal and ballot box votes, notably for CDU/CSU and AfD



Source: Federal Returning Officer

2 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2018). Die schwankenden Wähler. Analyse & Argumente 307.



Appendix 1

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