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Europe

Far-right AfD on track for its first win in eastern German state vote

By Sarah Marsh

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[1/2] People hold flags as Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) party leader in Thuringia state Bjoern Hoecke appears on a screen while speaking during an election campaign rally for the Thuringia... [Purchase Licensing Rights](#) Read more



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Summary Companies

- AfD set to win Sunday's vote in Thuringia, tie in Saxony
- New far-left BSW, founded by former Communist, polls third
- Coalition building is likely to be complicated
- Federal elections are due next year

BERLIN, Aug 30 (Reuters) - The far-right Alternative for Germany is predicted to come first in at least one of two elections in eastern states on Sunday, piling pressure on Chancellor Olaf Scholz's federal coalition over the economy, immigration and support for Ukraine.

The 11-year-old AfD, which has greater support in the formerly communist-run east, will be unlikely to be able to form a state government even if it does win, as it is polling short of a majority and other parties refuse to collaborate with it.

It will be the first time a far-right party has the most seats in a German state parliament since World War Two and its strength will complicate coalition building and could allow it to block constitutional changes and appointments of some judges.

The AfD is polling 30% in Thuringia, nearly 10 points ahead of the conservatives in second place, while tying with them in Saxony on around 30-32%. The newly-created far-left Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) is set to come third in both states.

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Strong gains for the two anti-establishment parties herald growing instability in Europe's biggest economy, reflecting a fragmentation of the political landscape that could also complicate efforts to form coherent national governments.

The AfD's signature topic of migration shot up the agenda after a [knife attack](#) a week ago in the western city of Solingen in which a 26-year-old suspected Islamic State member from Syria is accused of killing three people.

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"We want to end the failure of the state, the loss of control," AfD co-leader Alice Weidel told a campaign event on Wednesday in Dresden. "That can only be done through a sustainable change in migration and asylum policy."

The BSW, named after its [founder](#), a former communist, also opposes both immigration and military backing for Ukraine's fight against the Russian invasion; both parties seek better relations with Moscow.

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All three parties in Scholz's federal coalition are expected to lose votes and two may even struggle to make the 5% threshold to enter parliament. Their sagging popularity could mean a return to a conservative-led alliance in next year's national polls.

Business leaders [have warned](#) of the threat of far-right extremism to Europe's largest economy, saying it could make it harder to attract [skilled](#) [labor](#) and investment. German politicians say populist rhetoric has fuelled [physical attacks](#).

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ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT PARTIES ON THE RISE

The AfD is led in Thuringia by [Bjoern Hoecke](#), a man that some in the party considered so extremist they tried to expel him.

The former history teacher has called Berlin's memorial to Nazi Germany's Holocaust of Europe's Jews a "monument of shame" and [was convicted](#) earlier this year for using a Nazi slogan at a party rally.

While voting patterns in the formerly communist-run east are still distinct 30 years after reunification due to weaker party allegiances and greater [economic pessimism](#), Sunday's elections give a flavour of nationwide and even European-wide trends.

As in France and elsewhere, the rise of anti-establishment parties in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing cost-of-living crisis are complicating coalition-building and governability.

"Everything has gone wrong with the established parties: we need a new direction," said Thomas Leser, who was in the audience at the BSW rally in Suhl in Thuringia.

Created in January, the BSW, which combines social conservatism and far-left economics, is expected to win up to 20% and 15% respectively in Thuringia and Saxony, which could put it in kingmaker position.

"I'm also not happy when a party becomes strong in which there really are right-wing extremists and Nazis," party leader Sahra Wagenknecht said at a rally this week. "But who is responsible for the fact that so many people in our country vote for such a party out of anger and despair?"

"It's the politicians who have been ruling over people's heads for years," she said.

Both the AfD and BSW, which together are polling between 40-50% in Thuringia and Saxony albeit only 23-27.5% nationwide, oppose arming Ukraine, a particularly sensitive issue in eastern Germany, arguing that Kyiv should make peace with Moscow.

"Let's take a look at the supply of weapons, you also have to look for diplomatic solutions here, no matter with whom," said Gerhard Iffert at a BSW event in Eisenach.


The party is only polling 7-9% at national level but with Scholz's Social Democrats down to 15-16% from 25.7% at the 2021 elections, every vote counts.

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