

Opinion on the German Election: Targeted Political Misinformation

by Meriel Ott

23.09.2021

On the 26th of September Germany holds another federal election and the stakes for the country are high. Global issues such as the future handling of environmental threats, and challenges to the economy such as post-pandemic inflation and unemployment need to be addressed quickly for Germany to remain a strong and resilient nation and actor on the international stage.

Climate change has been on the political agenda since the last election. It is one of the most prominently discussed subjects during this election campaign by politicians and voters. Recent polls have shown that more than 80% of the population sees a severe need for more serious measures to tackle the increasing risk climate change poses to the environment and the population (ARD.DeutschlandTrend 2021).

As the election nears, candidates and party programs are examined under magnifying glasses. Not only the political message of each party is debated and assessed by various media channels, individuals and online, but much of the debate surrounding this election is tied to the candidates themselves. While Merkel, the German chancellor of the past 16 years, is leaving office, her successors find themselves in a series of mishaps and political faux pas. From being accused of plagiarism and CV tampering, to corruption, professional failure regarding corruption scandals and inappropriate behavior (Schultheis 2021), candidates struggled to uphold a favorable image in the media discourse.

However, none of the other two (male) candidates could measure up to the bad press and opposition that the green candidate Annalena Baerbock have received during her campaign. With natural hazards, like the severe floods earlier this year, wreaking havoc in southern Germany, the climate was at the forefront of election discussions propelling the Greens to the top of the polls in the early stages of their campaign (Nugent 2021). Baerbock, though, could not hold that position for her party as accusations surfaced that she embellished her CV and plagiarized in her recently published book (Schultheis 2021).

These self-inflicted mishaps are, however, arguably minor incidents compared to what the Social Democratic candidate Olaf Scholz is faced with – involvement in a tax fraud scandal,

a potential money laundering scandal by one of his ministry's units and involvement in the wirecard scandal (Chazan 2021). But while criticism of this nature is based on factual knowledge and voters are informed through official information channels, the probably biggest issue established democracies are faced with – misinformation – has also started to occur in the context of the German election (Delcker 2021).

Political “fake news”, especially on social media, are not uncommon anymore. Most recently voters in the United States and the United Kingdom have been targeted by misinformation campaigns with the intention to destabilize trust in political institutions and certain candidates. Now similar tendencies can be identified regarding the German election. The Greens and their candidate Baerbock have been the main target with over 70% of all election regarding misinformation online (Delcker 2021; Schultheis 2021). It is unclear why this distribution of wrongful information is so focused on the green party. However, suspicions lie on the greater push for change the party is advocating for and Baerbock being a woman (Delcker 2021).

To understand the magnitude and importance of these fake news for election results it is relevant to mention that much of the information does not stay within the “limits” of social media distribution. Many traditional media outlets pick up on misinformation online and do not always contextualize it enough. This is making the information less accessible and transparent for voters and thus contributes to confusion and the reproduction of fake news (Delcker 2021).

Despite suffering from misinformation and campaign mishaps, the German Greens have proven themselves politically competent and eager in several discussions and debates. Most recently Baerbock was accredited very good conversation skills, charisma, and knowledge of the field (statement by Claudia Roth in Nugent 2021). They have put forward a political agenda covering a range of current issues, focusing on bringing forward action plans not just limited to tackling climate change and the economic impact left on a pandemic-ridden society, but also regarding the strengthening of the European Union, trade relationships and international cooperation with a value based foreign policy approach (Nugent 2021). With such an agenda and hindsight regarding their still fairly high polling numbers it is very unlikely that the soon to be formed German government will not involve the Greens at least with the status of a junior partner.

The impact left by fake news, however, needs to be closely observed and assessed, as it can be considered another example of what threatens democratic stability and navigating trustworthy information channels in an increasingly digitalized world.

GERMANY NATIONAL PARLIAMENT ELECTION POLL OF POLLS

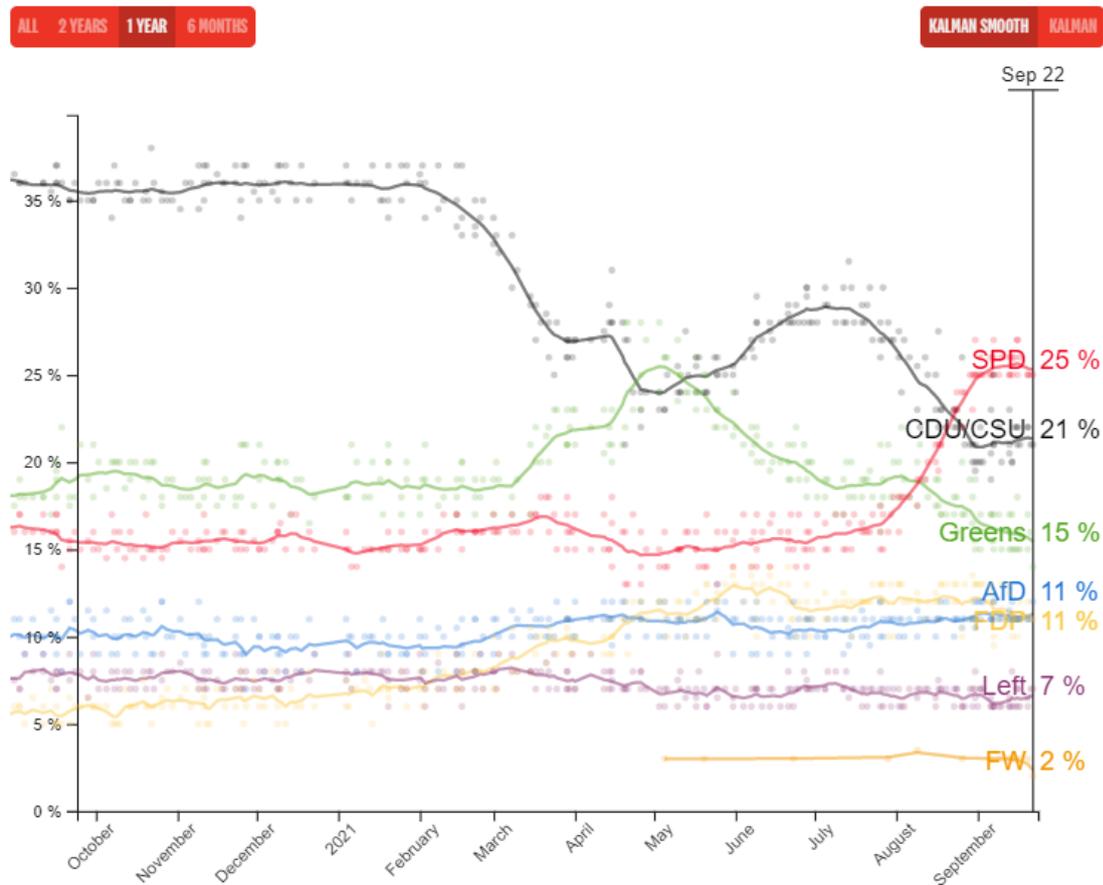


Figure 1 Most recent polling data by Politico [retrieved on 23.09.2021] <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-greens-annalena-baerbock-election-star-fades/>

References

ARD-DeutschlandTrend (2021). Mehrheit sieht Handlungsbedarf beim Klimaschutz. Tagesschau. [retrieved on 23.09.2021]

<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-2699.html>

Chazan, G. (2021). Scholz summoned before German MPs over money-laundering scandal. Financial Times: Berlin. [retrieved on 23.09.2021] <https://www.ft.com/content/32a73baa-4ada-43cc-a2e6-8b2884634931>

Delcker, J. (2021). Disinformation, fake news plague German election campaign. Deutsche Welle. [retrieved on 23.09.2021] <https://www.dw.com/en/disinformation-fake-news-plague-german-election-campaign/a-59104314>

Nugent, C. (2021). Annalena Baerbock Wants to Radically Change Germany. She'll Have to Win Voters' Trust First. TIME: Dachau. [retrieved on 23.09.2021] <https://time.com/6095884/annalena-baerbock-germany/>

Schultheis, E. (2021). Annalena Baerbock: German Greens' star fades in election campaign. Politico: Gelsenkirchen. [retrieved on 23.09.2021] <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-greens-annalena-baerbock-election-star-fades/>