For decades after WW II, Germany had a relatively stable system of political parties. The two main parties, Social Democrats (SPD) on the left and Christian Democrats (CDP, partnered with the Bavarian Christian Socialists, CSU) on the right, might form coalitions with the much smaller, liberal (in European sense) Free Democratic Party (FDP) sort of off-center.

That party system has been slowly fragmenting since German reunification in 1990. Reunification required incorporation of the remaining ex-communists, some of whom formed a party to the left of the SPD. When that party collapsed in the 2002 federal election, it was succeeded by a new "Left" party that has won around ten percent of the vote in the past three elections. Environmental activism led to creating the Green Party in the West in the 1980s; since merging with an Eastern coalition, Alliance '90, the Greens have alternated high points and disappointments. FDP results have also varied substantially. Most recently, reaction to the refugee influx in 2015 has bolstered the far right, "euroskeptic," anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AFD), third in the 2017 election with 12.6% of the vote.

One result has been a new kind of stability: viewing the alternatives as unthinkable, the CDU and SPD formed "grand coalitions" from 2005-2009 and 2013 to now. But the SPD has lost about half its voters since 1998, and its decline, the increased support for the alternative parties, and the instability of that support raise crucial questions: Can the SPD recover? How will German government work as party politics changes? And with what consequences?