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Losing By Winning: Angela Merkel's Pyrrhic Victory In Germany

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With the election of President Donald Trump, some political observers anointed German Chancellor Angela Merkel as leader of the free world. That never was a burden she or the Federal Republic could bear. But last Sunday's election results mean it is no longer even theoretically possible.

That poll left her as Germany's Chancellor. But she has been significantly weakened as her party hemorrhaged votes and risked civil war. Forging a new government coalition could take months and almost certainly will yield an unstable administration or perhaps leave a minority government.

Indeed, the votes had barely been counted before her own party began to split. The Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union are sister parties; the latter fields candidates only in the populous, conservative state of Bavaria. Both parties did badly; the combination suffered its worst result since Germany's first election in 1949, receiving 32.9 percent. That was a drop of 8.6 percent from four years ago, when the CDU/CSU almost won a majority in the Bundestag on its own

Many of those lost votes came from conservative voters upset with Merkel's welcome of a million migrants during the refugee crisis of 2015. Even Merkel acknowledged the necessity of winning back votes from the xenophobic, nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD). A Christian Democrat backbencher spoke for many when Detlef Seif declared "The CDU has its core brand and we have to deal more with the issues of our own voters."

The CSU is even more desperate, falling below 39 percent, a drop of ten percent from four years ago, and faces a state poll next year. So the party is demanding limits on immigration. Deputy party head Manfred Weber, a leader in the European Parliament, announced that "there needs to be an upper limit to the number of refugees in Germany." Similarly, Joachim Herrmann, the CSU's top candidate, argued: "There must be a clear upper limit of refugees in Germany." He said that his party "is not willing to do without it." Most of the migrants entering the country initially came through conservative, traditional, prosperous Bavaria.

The CSU demand contradicts the policy of the last Merkel government. Restrictions also would conflict with the position of the Greens, who, along with the Free Democratic Party, offer the

most realistic alternative for a coalition. (The FDP sits uncomfortably between the Greens and CDU/CSU on immigration.) Merkel's current partner, the center-left Social Democratic Party, rejected continuing the so-called grand coalition. With the AfD and Communist legacy party Die Linke considered beyond the pale, the only workable arrangement appears to be the so-called "Jamaica" coalition between the CDU/CSU, FDP, and Greens. (The party colors of black, yellow, and green are the same as Jamaica's flag.)

But immigration isn't the only potential deal-breaker. Merkel committed Germany to almost double its military outlays by 2024, against the wishes of her Social Democratic Party partners. While the FDP favors the hike, the Greens oppose such an increase—as do the German people. Indeed, during the recent election the SPD tied her proposal to a very unpopular President Donald Trump.

The Merkel government also has supported a steady expansion of the EU and succession of Greek bail-outs. French President Emmanuel Macron was pressing Merkel to agree to stronger rule by Brussels, including a consolidated budget and finance minister. Although determined to protect Germany's fiscal solidity, she is an EU stalwart. However, some members of her own party, especially in the CSU, have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the steady increase in obligations on German taxpayers. The Greens are Europhiles, but the FDP, which gained 10.7 percent, more than double its tally four years ago, criticized increasing Germany's obligations. The AfD is pushing for a referendum on EU membership, so neither the CSU nor the FDP is likely to give way and risk further political losses to the right. Indeed, it will be difficult for Chancellor Merkel to resist pressure on the government to exercise more control over the nominally independent European Central Bank, which has put the full faith and credit of Germany behind spendthrift nations such as Greece and Italy.

A range of other issues divide the centrist CDU, socially conservative CSU, free market FDP, and leftist, environmentally activist Greens. The politics is even more complicated. Already Merkel has conceded the finance ministry, held for the last eight years by party elder Wolfgang Schäuble. During its last term in government the FDP took the foreign ministry even though its primary popular appeal had been economic, and the party was punished by disappointed voters. The Free Democrats made clear they would expect to provide the Minister of Finance this time.

Previously the Greens only joined a national coalition with the SPD, and the party suffers divisions between more ideological and pragmatic factions. Between 2009 and 2013 the FDP formed a coalition with the CDU/CSU, but achieved few of its objectives, disappointing its center-right, pro-business supporters. The FDP's vote collapsed in 2013, and the party failed to make the five percent threshold necessary to return to the Bundestag. Members of the CDU/CSU who saw 400,000 supporters desert to the AfD last Sunday have similar concerns.

Yet complicating the formation of a new coalition is not the most significant consequence. While the CDU/CSU lost the most votes, the SPD, a traditional governing party born 150 years ago during the German Empire, won the allegiance of barely a fifth of voters, dropping by 5.2 percent. While European leaders hoped that the continent's drift toward populism and

extremism had ended with Macron's victory in France, Germany's latest poll shows continuing disintegration of the political center.

In fact, Macron's victory reflected a political system that encourages majorities by holding run-off elections. That disguises rather than eliminates support for the extremes. In Germany a system of proportional representation ensures such backing is translated into Bundestag members.

Four years ago roughly two-thirds of voters chose one of the two major parties. They barely accounted for half this time. In former East Germany the AfD kicked the SPD into third place. In the state of Saxony the AfD won 27 percent. Some observers called the election the "revenge of the East."

Overall, the biggest winner was the AfD, which took a million votes each from right and left. Newly formed before the last election—and running on a free market, Euroskeptic platform—the AfD won 4.7 percent, remaining outside of parliament. This time the party, which had been taken over by nationalists-populists, gained 12.6 percent of the vote. The AfD was explicitly hostile to immigrants and Muslims. One of its campaign slogans was "Burkas? We like bikinis." Although it is not fascist/Nazi, and drew a majority of its support from voters disappointed with the major parties, some of its leaders espouse ugly and unsavory views. A party to the right of the CDU/CSU has entered the Bundestag for the first time since World War II. The establishment no longer defines the rightward limit to German politics.

Moreover, adding the AfD to Die Linke, which received 9.2 percent, more than a fifth of German voters backed extremist parties shunned by the others. The good news is that neither promotes totalitarianism nor advocates violence. Moreover, Germany today is radically different than when Nazis gained control. Nevertheless, the disintegrating center brings to mind the Weimar Republic's final days, when an increasing number of voters went hard left and right. If a political breakdown can happen in what might be the most prosperous and stable country in Europe, it can happen anywhere.

Germany's politics is about to become much more negative. Just how negative is uncertain. But the opening bell might have been rung when the FDP demanded to be seated away from the AfD, breaking parliamentary precedent. Much worse is likely from the AfD.

The one bit of good news from this election is the return of the FDP to Germany's national political life. The Free Democrats are liberal in a European sense—more libertarian on the American political spectrum. The Free Democrats are the only German party with even a nominal commitment to individual liberty. Alas, in practice they do about as well as the Republicans in promoting limited, constitutional government—which means not much.

There is, of course, no reason to mourn the travails facing the establishment parties. Chancellor Merkel shamelessly stole the SPD's party platform. She is little different from the average "socialist" from the Social Democrats. The rise of the AfD reflects the unwillingness of "respectable" politicians to challenge the status quo on almost any issue, irrespective of how flawed. Voters are desperate for an alternative, almost any alternative.

The danger is not so much the collapse of the almost meaningless mushy center, but the shift of votes to the extremes. The election of Donald Trump reflects similar trends. The result is not good, but reinstalling the once seemingly permanent ruling class would be even worse.

Germany's election will have only a limited impact in the short-term. Merkel will continue as chancellor and the German government will continue to occupy the political center. But unless the major parties back serious reform in areas of interest to German voters, the country's political center will continue to collapse. People in Germany and other nations are not willing to forever do what traditional elites demand.

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