

## **Chancellor Angela Merkel's Pyrrhic victory**

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel won an overwhelming victory and is destined to serve a fourth term as Germany's head of government. However, her victory looks Pyrrhic, as the two traditional ruling parties continue to hemorrhage voters.

Merkel's Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union combination (they are sister parties, with the latter running only in Bavaria) had its worst result since the Federal Republic of Germany's first poll in 1949, receiving 33.0 percent. Moreover, the CDU/CSU sustained the largest drop of any party from the election four years ago.

However, while the Social Democratic Party lost less in absolute terms, it also suffered its worst result since 1949. One of the country's two major governing parties, it won the allegiance of barely one-fifth of voters.

Four years ago the two main parties accounted for almost two-thirds of the votes. This time they barely gained half.

Four other parties will be represented in the Bundestag. Die Linke and the Greens edged up a bit. Moreover, two parties which failed to meet the five percent threshold for entering parliament in 2013 did substantially better this time.

The Free Democratic Party and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) together collected nearly a quarter of the vote, meaning nearly one-out-of-four parliamentarians will represent viewpoints absent over the last four years. The FDP, representing European liberalism (generally free market and pro-enterprise) rebounded from its shocking collapse with 10.7 percent of the vote to return to the Bundestag.

The AfD did even better, gaining 12.6 percent of the vote. The AfD's ascent brings to mind France's National Front, Britain's United Kingdom Independence Party, and other populist groups across the continent.

However, while AfD is nationalist, even xenophobic, showing hostility toward immigrants and Muslims, it is not a fascist party or the Nazis reborn. Indeed, 60 percent of its voters based their support on disappointment with the major parties rather than enthusiasm for the AfD. However, for the first time since World War II a far-right party has entered the Bundestag.

Until now the CDU/CSU managed to define the acceptable rightward limit of German politics. However, the crisis triggered by mass refugee flows from the Mideast—Germany accepted roughly a million migrants in 2015—created dissension even within Merkel's own party. The AfD's most popular candidate, Alexander Gauland, declared of Merkel: "We will hound her. We'll get our country and our people back."

The new Bundestag likely will yield a new governing coalition. The CDU/CSU could again join with the SPD, for the third time under Merkel, but the latter lost politically from its previous such partnership. The SPD's leaders buttress their case by insisting that it would be inappropriate to allow the AfD to act as the official opposition—a privilege afforded the largest "out" party—giving it significant advantages within the Bundestag.

Which leaves the so-called "Jamaica" coalition, the CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens. (The party colors of black, yellow, and green are the same as Jamaica's flag.) The numbers work, but forging a common government program that satisfies them all won't be easy. So there's at least a possibility that the SPD might ultimately be drafted as the only option—Merkel already urged the party to reconsider its opposition—though its members don't want to consider the possibility today.

The specific coalition will have ramifications throughout Europe and even across the Atlantic. The good news is the FDP's return to national politics. It is the only Germany party with even a nominal commitment to individual liberty.

The bad is the rise of the AfD, which has tainted controversial though legitimate popular concerns by turning them into weapons of intolerance. The ugly is the growing polarization of politics and shrinking mainstream in Germany.

Of course, the establishment parties have earned their problems. Little separates the major parties in Europe, either in terms of domestic programs or continental policies. And the results have not been pretty.

The problem in Germany is not that the CDU/CSU and SPD have shed so many supporters. It is that so many ended up with the AfD, which is unlikely to provide the serious, responsible debate warranted on a number of tough issues.

After Germany's vote Europe's most populous and prosperous nation looks slightly less stable. The immediate changes are likely to be small.

But if Germany's mainstream politicians don't start offering better solutions, the established political order will continue to fracture. And the populist tide will continue to rise.

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