



Germany chooses short-term political stability over long-term national growth

Doug Bandow

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Europe is fracturing, but establishment leaders across the continent believe the answer is to suppress dissent and strengthen the European Union. So-called Eurocrats hope Germany's electoral crisis will help them move forward.

But short-term success likely would mean long-term failure. The more Europe's elite presses for stronger, consolidated continental governance, the more virulent will grow the popular opposition. The center is shrinking throughout European politics.

Germans long have favored political stability. The system seemed to work _ until last September's election. The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (which run as one party) received barely more than a third of the vote, their lowest total since 1949. The Social Democratic Party came in at barely a fifth of the total, the least since 1933, before the Nazi Party extinguished German democracy.

The liberal (in a European sense) Free Democratic Party re-entered the Bundestag after falling below the five percent threshold in 2013. Even more significant, Alternative for Germany (AfD) scored nearly 13 percent. The AfD opposed immigration and capitalized on Germany's acceptance of a million economic migrants in 2015.

Blame for the collapsing center falls especially Chancellor Angela Merkel. She has shifted her right-leaning party leftward, effectively squeezing debate out of German politics and government.

But her reputation for being a pair of "safe hands" suffered in the aftermath of the surge in largely young, male, Muslim migrants.

After the September vote the SPD rejected proposals to renew the Grand Coalition. So Merkel

initially sought to reach an agreement with the FDP and Green Party, but the former feared again having its agenda submerged in Merkel's formless centrism and pulled out of talks.

Germany faced the prospect of new elections, which likely would produce a similar result, or a minority government, with the CDU/CSU forced to seek support from opposition parties issue-by-issue. However, SPD leader Martin Schulz came under pressure to reverse course.

Despite holding the weaker political hand, the SPD dominated the negotiations. The German Marshall Fund's Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff warned that the accord "has more of a left-liberal feel to it," reading "as if governing is one big giveaway, freebies for all."

However, grassroots SPD opposition is strong and party members must approve any final agreement. If the vote is no, German politics will be in chaos, since Merkel has rejected the idea of a minority administration and current polls indicate that a new election would yield the same governing choices.

Approval might be even more dangerous in the long-term, however. The coalition prospectus is notable for its refusal to make hard choices. Germans would see little difference between nominal left and right.

The AfD would be the official opposition. The FDP, Die Linke (descendent of East Germany's communists), and Greens also would highlight their differences with the center blob.

For instance, the SPD pushed for a United States of Europe. The GroKo accord offered more rhetoric than policy, but still may drive more voters to the FDP, which ran against Brussels, as well as the AfD, which began as an anti-euro party.

Elsewhere in Europe the Eurocratic leadership attempted to force its agenda. However, every time elites run roughshod over those they supposedly represent, popular resistance grows. The longer mainstream politicians refuse to debate controversial issues, the more their publics turn to less creditable representatives, like the AfD.

Obviously, it is up to the German people to decide on their government. But Daniel Hannan, a British Member of the European Parliament, warned against what he called "cartel democracy." In Europe voters increasingly have had to turn to more extreme parties as "battering rams to smash open the old system." The AfD is acting as such an instrument in Germany.

An alternative ruled out by Merkel and Berlin's elite would be to explore a coalition with the FDP and AfD. There are good reasons to avoid empowering the latter, but the party is not fascist and is less likely to drift further right if part of a governing coalition where its views are subordinated to those of other vaguely right-leaning parties.

Instead of leading opposition against the establishment, the AfD would become part of the

establishment and bear responsibility for the results. Other European governments have adopted this approach.

In Germany people are tiring of cartel politics. Another GroKo might put off the crisis for four more years. But at some point the German people are likely to take charge and demand a real debate over real change. If so, the sooner that occurs, the better.

Doug Bandow (chessset@aol.com) is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire."