

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## German politics have gone from boring and stable to unpredictable and volatile

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In September German Chancellor Angela Merkel won an underwhelming election victory. Her opponents lost more than she won, but observers still expected her to put together a new three-party coalition to replace the shopworn “grand coalition” with the Social Democrats. But coalition talks collapsed dramatically, and the most predictable of political systems headed into the unknown.

The poll was a disaster for the two traditional governing parties, the Christian Democratic Union (its sister party, the Christian Social Union, runs only in Bavaria), and Social Democratic Party. Both suffered their worst result since the nation’s founding in 1949 as seven parties entered the Bundestag.

Many of the CDU/CSU’s traditional conservative voters backed the Alternative for Germany, which collected almost 13 percent. The AfD ran against mass immigration and reflected the cultural alienation of many voters.

The CDU/CSU refused to work with the AfD, while the SPD refused to renew the grand coalition, which had sapped its ability to establish a separate identity. That left the so-called Jamaica coalition, the CDU/CSU, Free Democratic Party, and Greens, whose party colors matched those of the Jamaican flag.

It was never going to be an easy coalition. The CDU/CSU was determined to reassert its conservative bona fides, especially on immigration. The FDP had been the CDU/CSU’s partner many times, but failed to meet the five percent minimum vote in the last election and lost all of its Bundestag seats. Under new leadership the liberal (in a European sense) party backed freer markets and lower taxes. The Greens pushed a program that conflicted with many positions adopted by the Christian/Social Democrats and FDP.

How to square the political circle was not obvious. The Free Democrats joined with the CDU/CSU in wanting to restrict immigration; Merkel’s party could acquiesce to the FDP’s push for tax cuts. But Green demands to accept refugee families, close coal power plants, expand reliance on expensive, unreliable renewable energy, and strengthen the European Union proved vexing.

What happens next is anyone’s guess. Under pressure the SPD has agreed to talk with Merkel, but the party’s leaders still oppose renewing the grand coalition and the party membership seems skeptical. The Social Democrats have steadily lost votes and fear another term as junior coalition partner could be a political death sentence.

The CDU/CSU could form a minority government, perhaps with the FDP or Greens, which would require cobbling together a majority on every vote. That would enfeeble Berlin both domestically and internationally and force informal reliance on the AfD. Or new elections could be called — which likely would deliver a similar result, leaving the parties no closer to forming a stable government.

Or, and so far no one is discussing this possibility, the CDU/CSU and FDP could create a coalition with the AfD. The centerpiece would be a reduction in immigration/refugee admissions.

Joining the AfD is not a good solution, but there is no good solution. The pledge not to work with the AfD has two indirect but potentially dangerous consequences.

The first is to make Germany seem ungovernable. Since the political center has fragmented, it is hard for either of the two major parties to form a coalition with anyone but each other. However, grand coalitions feed resentment by reinforcing the status quo and suggesting that voting changes nothing.

Moreover, keeping the AfD out of government gives credence to its criticism of establishment politics while insulating it from responsibility. A stint in government might tame the movement and limit its popularity.

Indeed, similar parties in countries as different as Austria and Finland lost ground after entering government. If Berlin instead cobbles together a parliamentary majority based only on antipathy toward the AfD the establishment parties risk increasing the Alternative's appeal.

In Germany, as elsewhere in Europe, the political center is collapsing. Four years ago Germany's two main parties received nearly two-thirds of the votes. This time they barely gained half. Equally worrisome, "responsible" conservatives no longer define the acceptable right of the German electorate.

After spending years resting in Frau Merkel's supposedly reassuring hands, German voters opted for change. Because Berlin is the continent's most populous and prosperous nation, what is happening there is important beyond Germany's borders.

Germany isn't yet headed down the destructive path of some of its neighbors. But the latest challenge facing Berlin demonstrates how deep and serious are Europe's political divisions. And the necessity of new thinking to combat new challenges. Otherwise the future could take a turn back toward an ugly past.

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