



Deciphering Germany's Election Results

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What are we to make of the results of the German election? On the face of it, Germans have opted for a safe pair of hands. Angela Merkel, who first became Chancellor in 2005, and her party, the center-right Christian Democrats, have won 33 percent of the vote and 246 seats in the Bundestag. Since there are 630 seats in the federal parliament, Merkel's CDU/CSU will need to form a coalition with one or more parties to form government.

Over the last four years, she has governed with the center-left Social Democrats (SPD gained 20.5 percent of the vote and 153 seats). That arrangement is unlikely to continue because, in order to undermine the SPD, Merkel's milquetoast Christian Democrats have moved to the left. As such, the SPD base feels that the party needs to go into opposition to find its independent voice again.

A coalition with the leftist Die Linke (9.2 percent and 69 seats) is out of the question and the same goes for a coalition with the rightist Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), which gained 13.3 percent of the vote and 94 seats in the Bundestag.

The AfD is almost universally referred to as a "far right" party, but there is a world of difference between the AfD and the true far right (neo-Nazis, who remain pathetically few in number and are, rightfully, consigned to the fringes of German society). While polite society may find the AfD's policies (more on those below) reprehensible, nobody in the new Bundestag will be calling for a return to the 1930s.

That leaves Merkel with two parties, the free-market Free Democrats (11.3 percent of the vote and 80 seats) and the environmentalist Grüne (9.4 percent and 67 seats), both of which she'll need to form a stable government. Creation of the "Jamaica Coalition"—the CDU/CSU color is black, FDP's is yellow, and Grüne's is green—should pose no serious problems.

The FDP will get on with the pro-business elements in the CDU/CSU like a house on fire (they have done so on numerous previous occasions, including, most recently, between 2009 and 2013) and the Greens will be attracted to Merkel's environmentalist policies, including her opposition to nuclear power and heavy subsidies for "renewable" sources of energy.

That said, the 2017 election was something of a watershed due to the rise of the AfD, which only mustered 4.7 percent of the vote (below the 5 percent cut-off needed to enter the Bundestag) in 2013.

Unquestionably, the AfD's is a protest vote. The German political establishment has ignored growing public concerns over migration (a million refugees entered Germany in 2015 as a result

of the country's participation in the border-less Schengen area) and the euro (in spite of explicit prohibition in the Lisbon Treaty, Greece has been saved from bankruptcy by an injection of hundreds of billions of euros—some of it German taxpayer money).

In its desire to see Germany regain some of its sovereignty (while remaining a part of the European Union) and get out of the common currency, the rise of the AfD should be seen as a continuation of popular revolt against political establishment that started with Brexit and culminated in Donald Trump's elevation to the U.S. presidency.

Prior to the Brexit referendum, I noted that "the EU has become a driving force behind the rise of populist parties in Europe. These parties come from across the political spectrum—from the far left to the far right. Often they have nothing in common except for their opposition to further European integration and a desire, at the very minimum, to repatriate some of the EU powers back to nation states. They are present in all EU countries and hold, remarkably, one-third of all seats in the European Parliament."

"The EU is not only failing to address Europe's problems, it exacerbates them. Moreover, it seems to be unable and unwilling to reform. With every electoral cycle, 'establishment' parties committed to further European integration are growing weaker and anti-EU parties are getting closer to power."

A vote against Merkel and a vote against the EU establishment are, of course, practically synonymous. And, as expected, Merkel and the establishment are determined to do everything possible to freeze the AfD out of the political process. Instead, they should take AfD's concerns seriously, for if past is prologue, the AfD will only grow from strength to strength.

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