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Could German vote bring country more in line with U.S. military goals?

We break down the winners, losers, and possible paths to a government. But a future foreign policy is even more unpredictable.

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Germany has voted. The Social Democrats were the big winners. The Christian Democrats were the big losers. However, no one knows who will be in the new government, let alone who will lead the new government.

Nor is anyone sure how policy toward America and the world will change. The parties' positions differ in unpredictable ways. For instance, the Greens offer less certain support for NATO than the Christian Democrats, but advocate tougher policies toward China and Russia. With a three-party coalition near certain, almost every issue will require complex compromise and change will be mostly incremental. The negotiations over both issues and positions will be tedious, akin to forging a new arms control agreement with the Soviet Union.

And there is no deadline for agreement on a new administration: the only timetable is whenever what happens happens. Outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose Christian Democratic Union (along with its sister party, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria) dominated the last four governing coalitions, might still be in office long enough to give the next New Year's address.

At one level the election was one for change, with the Social Democratic Party edging ahead of the CDU/CSU and Greens nearly doubling their percentage. Yet, the SDP Kanzlerkandidat, or chancellor candidate, Olaf Scholz — the finance minister and deputy chancellor in the current “grand coalition” with the CDU/CSU — consciously modeled his candidacy *after Merkel* and her famous “safe hands.” Although his party's leadership is more left, Scholz seems close to the softer position adopted by Merkel over nearly two decades of leadership as she stripped the CDU of its once distinctive right-leaning program.

The defining characteristic of German politics is the necessity of coalitions. Only once has one party, the CDU/CSU, which governed 52 of the last 72 years, gained an outright majority.

Historically, the liberal (in a European sense) Free Democratic Party shifted between backing the CDU/CSU and the SPD, determining the winner. The rise of the environmentally-oriented Greens offered another option, and they joined in coalition with the SPD two decades ago. More recently the CDU/CSU and SPD created several “grand coalitions,” but hemorrhaged voters as they lost their distinctiveness. Rising were the new Alternative for Germany (xenophobic/anti-immigration/nationalist) and Die Linke (former East German communists/hard left SPD defectors).

The CDU/CSU and SPD could renew their partnership, though presumably with the latter holding the chancellorship. However, neither party favors this outcome. The SPD desires to set a new direction and the CDU/CSU doesn't want to surrender the chancellorship. This would be a last resort, a desperate step if the FDP and Greens divided and could not agree on which major party to support. If not a grand coalition, then the first three-party coalition in German history will be necessary. And the options are effectively limited to either the SPD or CDU/CSU with the Greens and FDP, the latter highlighted by its pro-market and business orientation.

Critical was the collapse in votes for Die Linke. Many Germans feared the possibility of a so-called Red-Red-Green coalition, empowering radicals in both the SPD and Greens. Die Linke fell from 8.6 percent to 4.9 percent, dropping beneath the five percent level normally necessary to enter the Bundestag — but saved by a special provision preserving representation for any party that wins at least three geographic seats (which are elected separately but folded into the overall proportional result).

However, Die Linke did not gain enough seats to give any other two parties a majority. Although a minority government would be possible, after the dismal Weimar experience the German constitution and popular practice encourage stability. The lack of this possibility prevents the SPD and Greens from pushing the FDP to enter into a coalition with few conditions, lest the first two go further left with Die Linke.

The AfD collected 10.3 percent, enough to make a difference. However, none of the mainstream parties will link to it. It began as a critic of the European Union and Euro currency but soon escaped its founder and adopted a more nativist agenda. Despite some fervent support, it is widely reviled by those who remember the trauma of nearly a century ago. At the national level mainstream parties so far have agreed to quarantine views that are extremist even if not actually fascist. To the good, total votes for both extremes are down by almost a third.

Thus, the new government almost certainly will feature either the SPD or CDU/CSU with both the Greens and FDP. The latter two disagree in important ways, including on their preferred coalition partners. The Greens look left to the SPD while the FDP looks right to the CDU/CSU. This could yield deadlock, but the public might punish anyone seen as recalcitrant. Four years ago the FDP dropped out of negotiations with the CDU/CSU and Greens, forcing a return to the grand coalition. A reprise would seriously undercut the Free Democrats' credibility as a serious partner in the future.

The public prefers a coalition led by the SPD and the election results also give it a slight advantage, a 1.6 percent win. (Merkel grabbed the chancellorship after the 2005 election in

which her party led the SPD by just one percent.) However, CDU/CSU Kanzlerkandidat Armin Laschet, though a dull and disappointing candidate, has a better record of building coalitions. With some justification he observed that “No party can derive a mandate to govern from this result, not us, not the SPD” and said that he wanted to negotiate over forming a government “on an equal footing” with the Social Democrats. Working against him is time. He is widely blamed for the CDU/CSU’s worst result in history and even his party colleagues are skeptical of his chances. His only hope for political survival is to pull off a longshot bid to win the chancellorship — and do so quickly.

FDP head Christian Lindner said he hoped to talk first with the Greens to decide which major party to choose. The Greens’ co-chairman Robert Habeck indicated that they intended to initially approach the SPD and FDP but added that “this doesn’t mean we won’t speak with” the CDU/CSU. Indeed, in his home state of Schleswig-Holstein the Greens are in a coalition with the FDP and CDU. The Greens undoubtedly realize that competition is likely to enhance the price paid for their support. If the Greens and FDP build a common front, they could demand more from the two major parties. Of that possibility, said Habeck, “Something new can happen.”

Despite obvious differences between the Greens and FDP, they have avoided clashing over red lines. The Greens emphasize climate change; the Free Democrats oppose tax hikes in Germany and reducing fiscal constraints on the European Union. On foreign policy they are surprisingly close. Indeed, though the Greens are typically seen as left-wing, the leadership is dominated by the “Realo” faction and derided by the hard left as neoliberal, the ultimate insult. Moreover, both parties would like to be in government and implement elements of their agenda. Thus, they should be able to square the circle.

Policy toward the U.S. and the rest of the world is unlikely to change dramatically whoever rules. The four (counting the CDU and CSU as one) centrist parties are all pro-NATO and European Union. The Greens and FDP are tougher toward China and Russia than the two traditional Volksparteien, or majority parties. The CDU/CSU and FDP want to spend more on the military; the Greens offer more rhetoric than specifics, while the SPD opposes a bigger defense budget. In any deal the SPD or CDU would get the chancellorship, while the Greens probably would collect the foreign ministry and Lindner would seek the finance ministry.

Whatever coalition emerges, tough issues await. One of the most rancorous is likely to be NATO and military relations. The U.S. and Germany will remain friends, with a better relationship than during the Trump years. However, Biden’s recent turn toward his own version of “America first” will affect relations with the new government, whatever its makeup.

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