The German Election - What Does It Mean for Europe?

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CHARLOTTE GALPIN, OCT 4 2017

All eyes have been on the German election this week. Following the 2016 Brexit and Trump earthquakes, a string of key European national elections in 2017 were expected to define the future of the EU going forward. In particular, the German election follows a nervous French presidential election which saw the pro-European Emmanuel Macron face off against the far-right Front National candidate, Marine Le Pen. Alongside a disappointing result for Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and a disastrous performance by Martin Schulz' Social Democrats (SPD), the German election has seen the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) enter parliament for the first time. Despite this, the election is unlikely to result in a government that turns away from Europe.

Firstly, the results: While it remains the largest party, Angela Merkel's CDU fell 8.5 points to 33%, whereas the SPD fell to the historic low of just 20.5%. The AfD, which was widely expected to enter parliament comfortably, achieved 12.6%. Benefiting from a fall in support for the two main parties, the remaining small parties all increased their share of the vote: the Left Party finished with 9.2%, the Greens with 8.9%, and the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) returned to parliament with 10.7%, recovering from their dramatic exit from the Bundestag in 2013.The result was broadly in line with the polls, although the CDU and SPD generally fared worse than they had hoped, and coalition negotiations will now begin. The only available option is an alliance between the CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens, after the SPD immediately ruled out another grand coalition.

News reports of the election result have described the election as a turning point for Germany. On the one hand, the election in Germany brings the country into line with other countries in Europe with strong right-wing populist parties. This is the first time that a radical right party has entered the German Bundestag in nearly 60 years. Undoubtedly, their success is a reaction to the refugee crisis – the AfD benefited enormously from opposition to Merkel's open-door policy of 2015. All parties in parliament supported the policy, leaving many voters feeling unrepresented. In many respects, there are parallels with other European right-wing populist parties who capitalise on disillusionment with politics. 60% of AfD supporters say that they voted for the party not out of conviction or sympathy with their policies but as a protest against the mainstream. AfD voters are more likely to have fears about open borders and globalisation, express a lack of trust in democratic institutions and feel a lack of control over their lives. Voters in the former east voted in much higher numbers for the AfD, where they were the second-largest party.

With its goal to provoke, the party is likely to disrupt the normally consensual and pluralist parliament. Their populist rhetoric and personal attacks on Merkel have lowered the tone of German politics and present a risk to liberal democracy. On Sunday evening, AfD lead candidate Alexander Gauland declared his intent to 'hunt' Merkel on the issue of refugees. With 94 out of 709 seats, they will have a much more significant platform and could make the Bundestag less effective.

On the other hand, the result is unlikely to have a significant impact on the EU and has few implications for Brexit. With the exception of the AfD, there are few differences between the parties when it comes to European integration, and Europe did not feature heavily in the campaign. The mainstream parties are likely to marginalise the AfD in parliament. The CDU, as Merkel said on Sunday, will seek to address the concerns of AfD voters with 'good politics'. Amongst the German population, anti-fascist movements are likely to mobilise – following the election result, spontaneous anti-AfD protests gathered across Germany. The CSU will likely take a harder line to close the so-called 'right-wing gap' created by the CDU's move to the centre that allowed the AfD to succeed. But the result is unlikely to

result in a dramatic change of approach.

The CDU, Greens and FDP are committed to European integration. Emphasising the transnational nature of migration, all three parties support European solutions to the refugee crisis. Indeed, in her speech on Sunday night, Merkel stated that 'we need to bring together all of the EU countries to fight against the causes of migration and to fight illegal immigration'. They call for deeper integration in common foreign and security policy and European defence, greater security cooperation and information-sharing between countries to fight terrorism.

There are some key differences: the CDU and FDP support a strengthening of the EU's external borders and new deals according to the EU-Turkey model. The Greens oppose such deals, instead calling for greater solidarity between European member states. The party has already stated any 'upper limit' on refugees will be a red line in coalition negotiations. The three likely governing parties will differ in approach, and when it comes to the Eurozone, the FDP and the Greens are likely to clash considerably. The FDP have ruled out supporting fiscal transfers between member states, which will complicate Merkel and Macron's plan for further integration in the Eurozone, and indeed, hopes for a reinvigoration of the Franco-German relationship. The likely long and arduous coalition negotiations will leave Germany without a government for some time, depriving Europe of the stability many hoped it would gain from the German election.

Overall, however, the success of the AfD is likely to strengthen moves towards further European integration particularly in issues related to migration and asylum policy, and European security. The difficulty for the coalition negotiations will be coming to a common position on exactly how this should be tackled.

**Image by Marco Verch*

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