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Turbulent Times Ahead: What to Make of the German General Elections 2017

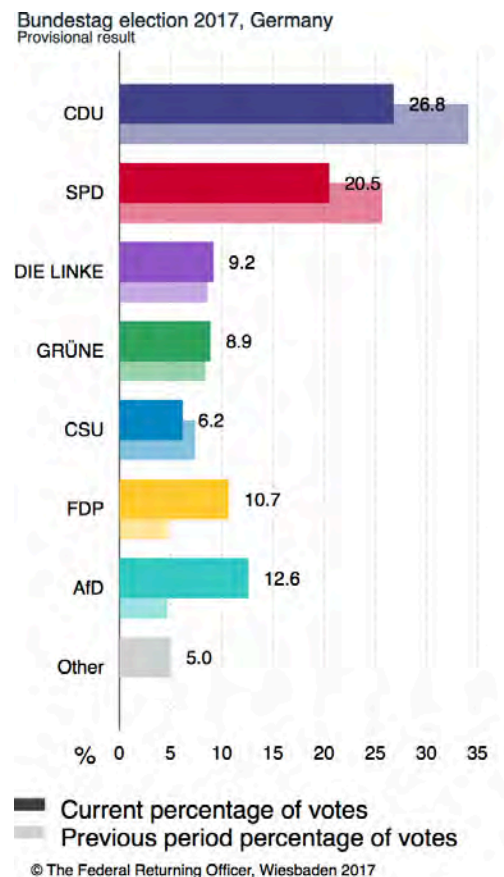
Bernhard Blumenau*

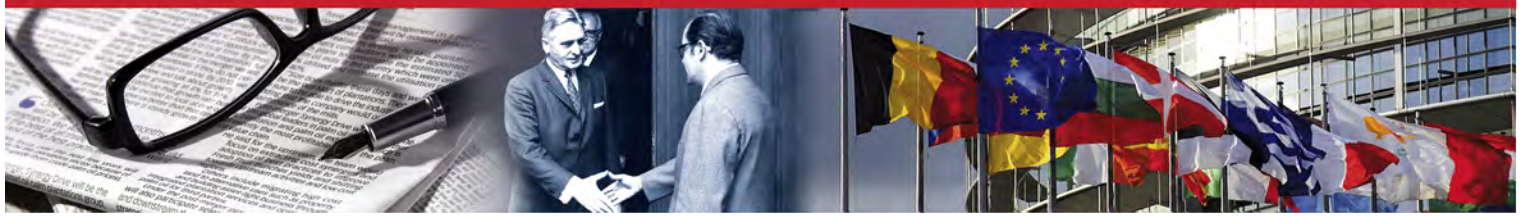
At 18:00 CEST, the German federal elections that for a long time had the air of boringness and predictability all of a sudden turned very surprising. The first prognoses of the election results were broadcast by German TV programme ARD and they revealed an unexpected development: despite a participation rate of 75% of the electorate, the two big parties lost massively and, combined, now only account for roughly 50% of the votes (33% for the Christian Democratic CDU/Christian Social Union group¹ of Angela Merkel; and 20.5% for the Social Democratic SPD under Martin Schulz) while in earlier times together they easily commanded two-third majorities in parliament. Less surprising was the entrance into parliament of the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), although a worrying 12.6% of the votes, made it the third biggest party. What had happened and what are the likely consequences? This paper will attempt to provide some thoughts on both these questions.

Not so boring after all: the 2017 federal elections

Germany holds general elections every four years (and state elections in the Länder in between). The seats in the Federal Diet (the Bundestag) are allocated through a first vote, on majority or the-winner-takes-it-all basis, and a second vote based on proportional representation, where the percentages of the votes matter for the allocation of seats.² Since the 2013 elections, Germany was governed by a coalition of the two strongest parties, the SPD and CDU, under Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been in power since 2005. Both parties lost significantly in the 2017 elections, with the CDU seeing its worst result since the 1950s and the SPD its worst-ever result in elections. While they remain the strongest parties they no longer have the number of seats they once had.³ The smaller parties all won seats, with the AfD managing for the first time to enter the federal parliament.

These charts show the results and changes since the 2013 elections. Provisional as they still are, these results are not likely to change much anymore so they can serve as a basis for analysis. The new Bundestag will be comprised of 709 seats, making it the biggest ever Bundestag. This means that for a governing majority of 50%, 355 seats are needed to pass legislation. The fact that Germany does not have a tradition of minority governments, and the system not being designed for that, only allows for a few possible constellations for the new coalition. All parties have strongly denied cooperating with the AfD so they will not be part of a government. Likewise, the CDU have ruled out a coalition with the Left Party. Meanwhile,



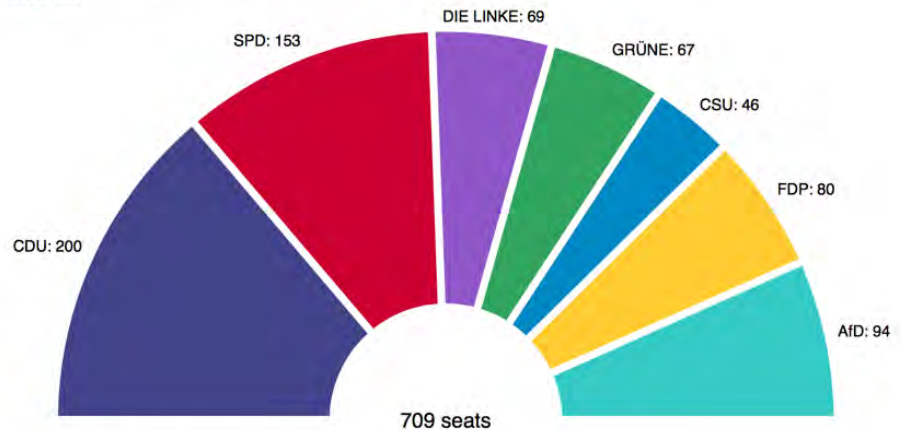


Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

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the SPD, immediately after the first prognoses came out, announced they would not renew the Grand Coalition but lead the opposition. Mathematically speaking, there now only remains one option: a coalition of the CDU/CSU together with the Green Party (Grüne) and the Free Liberals, FDP. Together, they would have 393 seats, 38 more than needed for the majority. These extra seats, however, will likely be needed. Looking at their election manifestos, there are significant differences between the parties, especially the conservative CSU and the Greens (for instance on refugees and environmental policies).

Distribution of seats
Bundestag election 2017, Germany
Provisional result



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Moreover, significant differences exist also between the Greens and the FDP (on taxation, environmental policy, Euro policy, and refugees) and all parties have issues of contention with the CDU (on foreign policy, EU policy, and a wide range of domestic policies) as well. This possible coalition of the four parties, dubbed 'Jamaica coalition' because of the parties' colours, would be a novelty for the Bundestag; and it has only been tested twice on the federal states' level – with rather meagre results.⁴ There is no guarantee yet that such a coalition will actually materialise. And even if it does, it will do so only after lengthy and cumbersome negotiations and with a very unstable common basis that might not prove strong enough for the whole term of four years. However, before we turn towards an analysis of possible outcomes of the elections, let us first try to assess why these results occurred in the first place.

Populism on the Rise

Historically speaking, Grand Coalitions of SPD and CDU/CSU have been the exception and not the rule in Germany. The first of these took place under Kurt Georg Kiesinger and Willy Brandt between 1966 and 1969. As of late, they have become a more common occurrence with Angela Merkel being rumoured to have a preference for a coalition with the SPD.⁵ Since she became chancellor in 2005, two of her three terms were marked by Grand Coalitions: 2005-9, and 2013-17. The logical consequence of a coalition of the two big parties is that it dwarfs the opposition in parliament giving the impression that no real opposition exists at all. During the first Grand Coalition in the 1960s, the FDP was the only parliamentary opposition and this led to the formation of the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition (Außerparlamentarische Opposition) protesting contentious policies such as the inclusion of emergency powers into the constitution. Yet, it also resulted in the right-wing NPD almost entering parliament (it returned 4.3% of the votes placing it underneath the 5% threshold needed for being represented in Parliament). After the last Grand Coalition between 2005-9, the smaller parties also won seats while the two big parties lost (the SPD, for instance lost 11% between 2005 and 2009). The same trend repeated itself in this election. In fact, both big parties are only doing marginally worse than in the 2009 election when the CDU/CSU returned 33.8% of the votes (approx. 0.8% more than now) and the SPD was at 23% (about 2.5% better than now). In that sense, the outcome of Sunday's election is not that unusual. What is different to 2009, however, is that those elections took place against the backdrop of an escalating financial and Euro crisis, while 2017 sees record-breaking low numbers of unemployment and an economy that is performing strongly, as well as a balanced federal budget. Consequently, why is the electorate seemingly penalising a government that, at first glance, has an exceptional performance to account for?



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2017

The answer to that is closely linked to the rise of the populist AfD and an alleged fear of change within broader parts of the population.⁶ One of the core issues that voters – across the board – seem to perceive as mishandled is the refugee crisis.⁷ Chancellor Merkel's decision to single-handedly open the borders to approx. one million refugees in 2015 created a dissatisfaction that resonates until today. The haste with which the decision was made, without proper debate and no mechanisms in place to deal with the refugees, created an air of chaos and upset a significant part of the population. Despite the relative calm around the refugee issue recently and the declining numbers of new arrivals the crisis is all but settled and could easily escalate again. Moreover, the low numbers of refugees arriving at the moment hinge on the uncertain cooperation of the Turkish government that has recently excelled in verbally attacking and offending many former allies, most certainly Germany. Turkey's recent behaviour produced further discontent with Dr Merkel's policy in Germany. Moreover, her refusal to adopt any upper limits for accepting new refugees fed into fears that the 2015 crisis might repeat itself. The AfD thrived on these fears as well as on Euro(€)-scepticism and latent xenophobia. The party then eagerly exploited the refugee crisis to catapult itself into a position of political significance, especially in eastern Germany. Many voters for the AfD felt that the big parties did not address the issues that they worried about in an election campaign that can best be described as 'lame', uncontroversial, and uninspiring. This was exploited by the AfD, a protest party, that criticised the policies in place and advocated radical, simple approaches on highly complex problems. Surveys suggest that people voted for the AfD precisely out of disapproval for the government's refugee policy while actually disagreeing with many other policies the AfD stands for. Consequently, their vote was supposed to be seen as a warning to the established party (much like the Brexit referendum seemed to have been in the UK) that they cannot simply continue business as usual.

With the AfD entering parliament, German politics are – unfortunate as it is – joining a trend that is spreading across the West from Poland to France, from the UK to the US: a shift to the right and a return to a more nationalist rhetoric. In the German case though, while 12.6% is a significant and lamentable share of seats, the AfD is nowhere near sitting on the government or directly influencing policies. The election results also mean that more than 85% of the voters did NOT vote for the right-wing populists despite a general dissatisfaction with Dr Merkel's refugee policies. Given that the AfD is rather good at mobilising its supporters to go and cast their vote, and they have probably used up their potential with a general participation rate of 76%, the actual support for the AfD across the population is likely even smaller than 12.6%. That remains a worrying number, especially in a country with a dark Nazi past, but it is no reason for panic. Moreover, the AfD in itself is very divided and it remains to be seen if it truly manages to survive as one united party or will soon split up into several splinter groups.⁸ Moreover, it is worth noting that people and parties which share many ideas with the AfD have done much better in other countries: the US having a president that echoes some of the thoughts of the AfD and France having had a right-wing politician coming within grasp of the presidency. This should, by no means, belittle the AfD problem but it is meant to provide context.

The AfD is obviously appealing to many who do not feel that their concerns are being taken seriously by the ruling parties which will have to address those issues better to drive the AfD out of parliament again. Germany needs to have a broader debate on how to cope with the challenges of technological progress, refugees and integration, social security, public spending and infrastructure investment, and the security of the pension system. Hopefully, with the SPD now leading the opposition and the time of the Grand Consensus in the Bundestag now over, serious debates about these concerns will return to where they belong: the parliament. None of these topics are unsolvable, but they do need attending to.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2017

The Unstable Future

What, then, are the implications of the vote? For one, for the first time in decades, the parliament will comprise six parties including a right-wing party represented in double-digits. This will change proceedings in the Bundestag and – if the AfD continues its approach of provocation and aggressive polemics – the tone. Debates are likely to become more polarising and rougher. As mentioned above, the results also underscore the relative decline of the two big parties: gone are the days when they together had more than 80% of the seats.

Forming any government coalition against this backdrop is likely to be difficult and lengthy with an uncertain longevity of the final arrangement. The CDU (certainly the CSU) will be tempted to win votes back from the AfD by moving more to a centre-right position, especially on issues such as migration. That would be in contrast to the programme of the centre-left Green party. The FDP and the Greens also disagree on a significant range of topics (environmental policies for one, upper limits for refugees for another). All of this will make coalition negotiations very cumbersome, and they will certainly last for months. The premature end of the 'Jamaica coalition' in Saarland in 2012 serves as a warning that even if a coalition treaty is agreed on, there is no guarantee it will hold for the whole term. The CSU having lost heavily in Bavaria is under pressure to regain votes here which will likely make the party more confrontational towards Dr Merkel (as the article cited in footnote 1 indicates). It remains to be seen how much of Dr Merkel's attention will be absorbed by managing this coalition of four parties and how much time she will be able to dedicate to 'the bigger issues', such as European integration or any of the domestic concerns of the electorate listed above.

However, all four parties involved are well aware that the 'Jamaica coalition' is the only option for Germany, at least if the SPD does not have a change of heart. There is, therefore, pressure on all of them to come to an agreement to prevent Germany from drifting into instability. Compromises on contentious issues are also possible, however hard they will be to achieve. If done properly, the 'Jamaica coalition' could win back trust from AfD voters and could develop new policies on many of the challenges facing the country. Because so many actors are involved there will also be serious debates, in coalition meetings, in the Bundestag, and in society. Such debates might be beneficial towards restoring trust in the established parties.

As for the future of the SPD, there, too, are question marks. Mr Schulz was quick to announce that his party would not be part of a new government. However, when push comes to shove, and the 'Jamaica coalition' does not materialise, the only remaining options are new elections – that would probably only benefit the AfD – or a relaunch of the Grand Coalition. It will be for Mr Schulz and his party to decide which is the lesser of the two evils. In any event, until a new government is formed, the current CDU/CSU-SPD one remains in charge. Mr Schultz recent confrontational tone towards Dr Merkel and the CDU will not help to make the government's transitional job any easier. It will be a challenge for the SPD to assume the opposition role as long as they are still part of the government, and this dilemma could easily paralyse the administration. With the EU facing decisions to be made on Mr Macron's plan for the Euro zone, or Brexit, no one can afford an incapacitated German government. Yet even once the new coalition stands, the challenges for Mr Schulz will remain manifold. He will likely move the party more to the left in order to re-enlist voters that lament growing social drifts and insecurities. This might be an opportunity for the SPD to redevelop its profile as a social-democratic party. The party could put a strong emphasis on social politics and try to provide solid answers to the many questions related to social, technological, and global changes. If done properly the SPD could reclaim votes and reinfuse trust into the political system and itself. If the SPD does not manage to provide solutions to the challenges of social and technological change, there is no guarantee it will remain what it rarely is even today: a big party.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2017

What is very clear is that in order to win dissatisfied voters over to the mainstream parties and to starve the AfD of its votes, the big parties will have to engage in a more serious debate about refugee and immigration policies, including changes to migration laws and a possible upper cap for refugees.⁹ This could remove one of the corner stones of the AfD's platform and its basic *raison d'être*.

The Road that Lies Ahead: Looking Beyond Germany and Beyond 2017

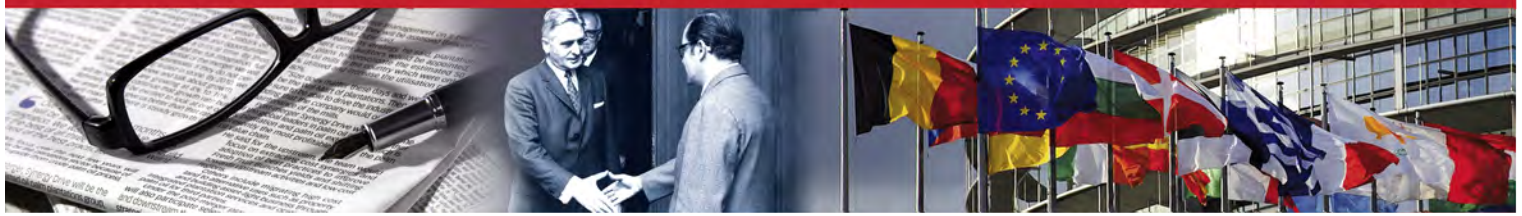
If no coalition can be formed, new elections will be the only way out.¹⁰ The question remains though, whether new elections would produce any significant changes in the results.

One possibility could be that if new elections are declared, Angela Merkel would not run again as candidate, opening up the possibility for a new person untainted by the 2015 refugee crisis to lead the CDU and likely, the next government. This might convince some voters to return from the AfD to the CDU. For Dr Merkel personally there might be some appeal to that notion: she has already entered the history books on several accounts (first female chancellor, first East German chancellor, one of the longest serving chancellors). And history, at least on the long run, will be kind to her: she presided over an era of a soaring economy, low unemployment, and a balanced federal budget, coupled with an unmatched high international standing of herself and her country. It might be tempting to retire on this legacy rather than overshadowing it by leading a quarrelling coalition of difficult allies or a country that enters a period of controversy and prolonged governmental paralysis. If she is staying on as chancellor, her future might resemble the title she has been given in Germany and abroad: 'Mutti' – a mum who has to keep four difficult children at bay. Yet, no obvious candidate is in sight to succeed her, Mrs Merkel having been very good at outmanoeuvring any competitor in her party; and less good at training an heir-apparent.

Indeed, Germany seems to be drifting into a period of heightened domestic controversy and possible instability, which is a difficult basis from which to tackle the many international issues Europe and the world are facing. This era of domestic volatility will lead to an even more inward-looking Germany, which is bad news for a world that is facing challenges on many fronts: climate change, rising international tensions, growing populism and nationalism, a slumbering Euro crisis, and Euro-scepticism to mention a few. Germany might be a weaker international anchor than it had been before last weekend. Turbulent years lie ahead and the results of the German elections will resonate far beyond 2017, and far beyond Germany.

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Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2017

Endnotes

¹ Normally, the CDU and the Bavarian CSU form a common group in the Bundestag so their votes are counted together. There are indications, however, that this might now change in the new Bundestag and the CSU might act on its own, see tagesschau.de, 'Seehofer Will Entscheidung Über Fraktionsgemeinschaft Mit CDU', *Tagesschau.de*, accessed 25 September 2017, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/seehofer-csu-cdu-101.html> .

² For more details on the election system, please take a look at the Papier on the German elections in 2013, which you can find here: Bernhard Blumenau. 'German Elections on 22 September 2013: The Primacy of Domestic Policy'. *Current Affairs in Perspective of the Fondation Pierre Du Bois*, no. 5 (September 2013). <http://www.fondation-pierredubois.ch/publications/2013-2/germany-2/>.

³ Up until the early 2000s, both parties would dominate the Bundestag.

⁴ In the federal state of Saarland, a 'Jamaica coalition' was formed in 2009 and only lasted until 2012, another 'Jamaica coalition' is currently ruling in Schleswig-Holstein.

⁵ One reason for that could be that, indeed, both parties' programmes have not really differed that much recently, offering a lot of common ground – but also a perceived lack of choice for the voters.

⁶ A recent survey seems to suggest that fears about cultural changes in Germany as a result of migration are the biggest concerns for the AfD electorate, see Jörg Schönenborn, 'Wer Sind Die AfD-WählerInnen?', *Tagesschau.de*, 24 September 2017, <http://blog.tagesschau.de/2017/09/24/wer-sind-die-afd-waehlerinnen/> . Certainly, one could add to this fears about changes deriving from globalisation, the transformations of industry and labour as a result of digitisation, social transformations, and insecurities regarding the future of social security system. Unsurprisingly thus, the AfD manifesto basically promised to turn back the hands of time to the 'good old days', whatever they were. This fear of change is, of course, a problem well known in other Western countries, too.

⁷ 'ARD-Deutschlandtrend: Große Mehrheit kritisiert Flüchtlingspolitik', *Die Zeit*, 3 February 2016, sec. Politik, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-02/ard-deutschlandtrend-sonntagsfrage-umfrage-fluechtlingspolitik> ; 'Umfrage Zur Flüchtlingspolitik: 82 Prozent Für Korrektur von Merkels Kurs', *Handesblatt.de*, 9 September 2016, <http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/umfrage-zur-fluechtlingspolitik-82-prozent-fuer-korrektur-von-merkels-kurs/14525772.html> ; 'Infratest Dimap Umfrage: Nächste Regierung Soll Sich Vor Allem Um Die Frage Der Zuwanderung Kümmern', *Www.infratest-Dimap.de*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/> .

⁸ First signs for that are already showing with one of the AfD protagonists, Frauke Petry, declaring she would not be part of the AfD parliamentary group, and that she could possibly leave the AfD altogether, see 'Schmiedet Frauke Petry Pläne Für Eine Eigene Fraktion?', *Tagesschau.de*, accessed 26 September 2017, <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/petry-227.html> .

⁹ Obviously, to resolve the refugee crisis comprehensively, effectively, and permanently, one would have to address the core reasons for refugees coming to Europe and find ways to improve the conditions in their home countries. These debates would have to be held in the international forums and no promising signs for any such solutions can be seen at the moment. Such approaches would have to involve a lot of money and time: both resources few Western governments (nor German parties) have available in sufficient quantities.

¹⁰ The constitution gives the federal president certain emergency powers for a deadlock in parliament but it is very unlikely he will resort to them, at least for the time being.