



German Elections: Did Merkel Win Too 'Well'?

The extent of her victory may cause her more problems during the next four years than she had in the last four.

Angela Merkel came within a whisker of leading her centre-right Christian Democratic Union to an absolute majority of parliamentary seats in the 22 September German federal elections, almost achieving what only one leader in the 64-year history of the Federal Republic – the first post-World War II Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, in 1957 – had previously managed.

Alone among the leaders of the big EU member states, she has survived the global financial and Eurozone crises. She dominates her party and the German political landscape. Already before her re-election, backed by the strength of the German economy, she overshadowed all other EU leaders and exercised a preponderant influence on how the Eurozone crisis was managed.

Paradoxically, there are nonetheless grounds for thinking that Merkel won the elections too 'well' and that the extent of her victory will cause her more problems during the next four years than she had in the last four.

First, in winning back many of the votes that went to her small liberal coalition partner, the FDP (Free Democratic Party), in 2009, she drove it below the five percent threshold and – for the first time since 1949 – out of the federal Parliament altogether. In opposition alongside the new 'anti-euro' party, the

AFD (Alternative for Germany), the FDP may find it hard to rise again. The Christian Democrats might thus lose their natural political ally for the indefinite future.

Second, short of forming a minority government, which would be unprecedented in Germany, Merkel has to search for a new coalition partner: either the Greens or, more likely, the centre-left SPD (Social Democratic Party), with whom she already governed in a 'grand coalition' from 2005 to 2009. Apart from issues of ideological affinity, no other coalition could provide Merkel with the necessary support in the upper chamber of the federal Parliament, which has the power of veto over much German legislation.

Having been on the losing end in their last coalition with Merkel, however, the SPD may be a less reliable and less docile partner the next time. Opposition to a renewed 'grand coalition' will be stronger in the SPD than it was in 2009 and the party will be more worried than it was then about losing its political profile and voters to the parties on its left – the Greens and the Left Party, who will be in the opposition. SPD leaders will be forced to wring more far-reaching policy concessions from Merkel than she would have had to make to the much smaller FDP.

Merkel's toughness versus the debtor states in the

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Eurozone certainly helped to limit support for the AfD (Alternative for Germany) in the elections. The nationalist right is still weaker in Germany than in almost all other EU member states. But, although the AfD narrowly failed to clear the five percent threshold and enter the parliament, its result suggests that it has a chance of establishing itself as the first credible party to the right of the Christian Democrats in the German party-political spectrum. If the AfD's growth continues in next year's European parliamentary elections, it may succeed in doing so. This would raise the pressure on Merkel to be (even) more tight-fisted concerning financial aid and guarantees for other Eurozone states than she has been up until now, but would also exacerbate tensions in any new 'grand coalition', as the Social Democrats would prefer to ease the emphasis on austerity in the Eurozone or at least supplement it with measures, such as greater public investment, to promote economic growth.

For the latter reason, the grand coalition government that will probably emerge in Berlin is likely to pursue a slightly more flexible Eurozone policy than its predecessor. But, given the unpopularity of 'bailing out' other Eurozone members in Germany, the SPD will not push for radical policy changes. There will certainly be more continuity than change in German European policy.

The danger of a grand coalition is that it will strengthen the political extremes in Germany as grand coalitions have often done elsewhere. The next parliamentary election could produce a much less 'Europe-friendly' party-political constellation in Germany than this one, particularly if by then the Eurozone crisis has not been banished.

Should such a scenario materialise in 2017, the consequences for the EU and European integration would be grave. The EU has survived many serious crises in the past, but so far never had to cope with a crisis 'made in Germany' such as a much more 'Euro-sceptical' Germany would provoke.

In retrospect, the present period in German politics would then look like the lull before the storm.



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