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Breaking Down the 2021 German Federal Election

A reshuffling of the political centre and a disaster for the Left

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The plenary chamber of the German Bundestag.

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The election to the twentieth session of the German parliament, the Bundestag, marked the end of 16 years of Angela Merkel's chancellorship. Together with her administration, an upheaval in the party system has come to a temporary end: after the Social Democrats (SPD), the Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social union (CDU/CSU)—the last remaining old-style "people's party"—can no longer easily cross the 30 percent threshold and claim the dominant role in government. The German party system has become pluralized.

As was to be expected after the recent state elections, an anti-democratic party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), consolidated its position. For the time being, the party system is divided into a camp of democratic parties facing off against a political force that repeatedly dismisses the constitutional rules for settling political conflicts of interest. How long the "firewall" against the anti-democrats will last is primarily in the hands of the CDU/CSU.

Thirdly, Merkel's chancellorship marks the end of a decade of a reluctant "return of the state". In the various crises since 2008, the German state has acted as a rescuing and protecting authority from the (man-made) catastrophes of the market and nature. Since the COVID-19 crisis, it has become generally evident that public institutions, i.e. the state as such, are in need of modernization. The composition and programme of the new government will have to decide on how the transformation towards a "green capitalism" will play out: with full confidence in the "unfettered" forces of the market, or driven by investments and regulations imposed by a modernized democratic state? The election results show that there is no clearly favoured path among the population.

It is likely that the next federal government will consist of three (without CDU/CSU) or four parties (with them). The CDU candidate for chancellor, Armin Laschet, already hinted on election night that new models such as the "Austrian model" (a coalition between conservatives and the Greens) could become important. After the Merkel era, the political balance of power in Germany will be reshuffled. The transformation to a multi-party system with three parties that win 15–25 percent and several 5–10-percent parties seems to be complete (which does not rule out the possibility of new parties coming in and old ones disappearing). Flexibility and volatility among German voters continues to increase.

Electoral Participation and Unique Circumstances

Overall turnout was slightly higher than in 2017. The open-ended polling numbers obviously boosted participation. The SPD in particular seems to have succeeded in mobilizing non-voters. There were longer waiting times outside some polling stations—despite a historically high rate of postal votes.

The circumstances in which voters decided on the composition of the Bundestag differed in many respects from previous elections. One particularity, of course, resulted from the ongoing pandemic and the persistence of pandemic regulations, which have suspended everyday routines and promoted social isolation. After the third wave, the longing for stability and security is widespread in Germany society. Many people are struggling to return to normality, and may have experienced the campaign itself as a "distant and abstract event", in the words of Stephan Grünewald from the Rheingold Institute.

This election was marked by a number of unique circumstances:

- The incumbent chancellor did not seek re-election. Thus, it was clear that at least in terms of personnel, there would be a new beginning. The election was thus also about the question of how big this "new beginning" ought to be.
- For the first time, not two but three people were competing for the chancellorship. Only the Greens's Annalena Baerbock came from the opposition, while the other two candidates, Olaf Scholz and Armin Laschet, represented the coalition that has governed Germany for the last eight years.

- In the final weeks before the election, no party was clearly ahead. For the first time since 2005, it was impossible to predict who would win. This reflected a change in the party system.
- For the first time in post-war history, a three-party coalition was regarded as the most likely outcome of the election. Four three-party coalitions, all already tried and tested in the federal states, appeared possible.
- Given the multitude of options, the character of the election changed: the election would decide on the composition of the Bundestag, not the coming government. Who will govern the country will be decided by the parties and parliamentary groups. This reinforces an aspect of parliamentary democracy that the federal president felt compelled to emphasize after the last election: the parties are obliged to form a government after election day.

A Reshuffling of the Centre

The Christian Democrats and their Bavarian counterpart received the worst result in their history. The CDU fell below 20 percent (18.9 percent), the CSU barely passed the threshold to enter parliament (5.2 percent), and overall lost to the SPD for the first time since 2002. The CDU/CSU not only ran a candidate for the chancellorship who could not pull his party along, in the past months and years they also lost considerably in terms of how the electorate assessed their political competence.

Their election result was nevertheless above their low polling numbers—probably due to the mobilization of their core voters terrified at the prospect of a "slide to the left". Having prevented this, the party's political leadership claimed victory on election night. What they overlooked, however, was that for a parliamentary majority against a centre-left SPD-led government with the Greens and Die Linke, they would need MPs from the AfD. A hidden message of the election evening was therefore also: when it comes to taking down the "Reds", the CDU will even cooperate with the AfD.

The CDU/CSU could still retain the chancellorship if it succeeds in reaching agreements with the Greens and the FDP to form a government. The return to the chancellery is also necessary to keep inner-party conflicts, which openly played out again and again since the last Bundestag elections, under control enough to at least postpone the party's further disintegration. In opposition, on the other hand, an open conflict over its future strategic direction would become unavoidable.

The SPD is the winner of this election. Olaf Scholz can lay claim to the chancellorship and try to form a government majority. What is striking about the electoral success—compared to the three previous elections—is the consistency and unity with which the SPD implemented its election strategy. In the eastern German states, the SPD is clearly ahead of the CDU. In Brandenburg it achieved its best result with 29.5 percent. It is the second-strongest party behind the AfD in Thuringia, with 23.4 percent, and in Saxony with 19.3 percent.

The SPD adopted a recognizably offensive election strategy early on, which it maintained against all predictions of doom and public ridicule. When Olaf Scholz was announced as candidate for chancellor over a year ago, the SPD was polling far behind the CDU/CSU and the Greens. Many asked: why did the party need a candidate for the chancellorship—other than for its own ego? With whom could Scholz form a government? But the SPD was the only party to understand at an early stage what Angela Merkel's resignation would mean. As I **wrote in September of last year**, "if the SPD wants to expand and actually enter the chancellorship, it needs to win over voters who will cast their ballot for Scholz instead of the CDU."

The fact that other crises—the flooding disaster, forest fires, and the Afghanistan withdrawal—were virulent around the election may have further strengthened the momentum of the "quasi-incumbent". Politically, Olaf Scholz relied on winning back social-democratic Merkel supporters with three themes that were both concrete and could serve as a screen for all kinds of projections: "respect" and "dignity" for hard-working people, a significant increase in the minimum wage along with moderate tax increases for people who "earn as much as I do or more", and a climate-friendly industrial policy.

What an SPD chancellor can achieve in which political constellation, what Olaf Scholz "really" stands for, is open to debate. What is indisputable, however, is that he has succeeded in giving the SPD what his party needed most urgently after a long phase of decline: the image of being able to win and make strategic decisions again. How long this will last beyond election day remains to be seen.

The Greens can celebrate a historic election success—their best result in a federal election ever—although they fell well short of the expectations that were fuelled by good polling numbers until early summer. In all likelihood, they will be part of the next federal government—and may have to deal with Christian Linder as finance minister, who is not only committed to maintaining the "black zero" (a balanced federal budget) without raising taxes, but also has a fundamentally different understanding of the state's role in public life.

For a long time, the Greens were riding high in the polls. At the same time, experience has taught that the closer election day comes, the more voters ask themselves whether they really agreed with the changes the Greens sought and how they planned to implement them. The Greens, with their image as the environmental and climate party, have been good for the political mood several times, but when it came time to commit to their policies, approval ratings have dwindled. If the polls are to be believed, it is not younger but older voters who tend to opt for the more relaxed transformation to green capitalism with the CDU or SPD.

Polls indicate that a clear majority of the population is open to change when it comes to climate policy—to varying degrees, no doubt. But what overwhelms and disturbs many is the feeling that, as consumers and citizens, they alone should be responsible for avoiding

the climate catastrophe. Across party lines, there has been talk of personal responsibility in many areas of society for decades. The fear of being pushed into such an overburdening spiral by the Greens' policies leads many people whose political mood is more or less climate-friendly and green to cast their vote elsewhere.

Consolidation on the Right, Catastrophe on the Left

Die Linke suffered a disastrous result. Far from its goal of a double-digit result and government participation, with 4.9 percent it failed to meet the threshold to enter parliament and lost over 2 million votes, almost half of its 2017 vote. Again, about half of the lost votes went to its two coalition partners of choice, the SPD and the Greens, according to preliminary estimates by Infratest dimap. However, because the party was able to defend three direct mandates in Leipzig (Sören Pellmann) and Berlin (Gesine Lötzsch and Gregor Gysi), it will enter the Bundestag after all with a group and presumably limited parliamentary rights via the "basic mandate clause". The absolute worst case was thus narrowly avoided.

In the five eastern German states, Die Linke only achieved double-digit results in Thuringia (11.4 percent) and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (11.1 percent). In Brandenburg, with 8.5 percent, it is even behind the Greens (9.0 percent). The average for all five states was only 9.8 percent.

Tough inner-party struggles over the future direction of the party are foreseeable. On the surface, tactical weaknesses can be cited as reasons for the election result. In fact, these electoral tactical weaknesses are only the consequence of deeper problems and persistent strategic weaknesses. Like the CDU, Die Linke was also unable to change its leadership in time for the election due to the pandemic. Thus, the new party leadership hardly had time to set its own positive accents and thus set themselves apart.

Since the collapse of Hannelore Kraft's minority government in North Rhine-Westphalia and Die Linke's subsequent failure to win re-election to the state parliament in 2012, the party has been faced with the task of developing a strategy worthy of the name. Strategies are aimed at medium-term time horizons, i.e. more than one legislative term. They include programmatic electoral promises on general, normative political principles, answers to questions of what role vote maximization and/or political bargaining power should play, and what electoral promises can be fulfilled given the balance of forces between the different parties. Such considerations are probably not lacking in Die Linke—on the contrary. What is lacking, however, is a strategic centre that could rally party activists behind a strategy that would enable them to persuade voters to support the party's programme. This is the task the party leadership will have to accomplish in the next two years: to recognize and work through the "mistakes of the last years" and "redevelop the party", as party co-chair Susanne Hennig-Wellsow stated on Sunday evening.

The Free Democrats (FDP) enter the new Bundestag with a solid double-digit result. Again, it owes its victory to a campaign around party leader Christian Lindner. It is striking that voters ascribe the party considerable competence in "digitalization", especially young (male) voters. At the same time, a small social-liberal "wing" has emerged in recent years as an antithesis to an understanding of the state and freedom that Christian Lindner promotes: the state as a bureaucratic monster that needs to be curtailed and tamed.

The FDP managed to present itself as a moderate civil rights critic of the pandemic measures. In doing so, it treaded a fine line between liberal-democratic civil rights and libertarian contempt for the state, which regards all state activity as a threat to the freedoms of the free-market cowboy. Above all, however, Lindner's FDP profited from the weakness of the CDU/CSU and the strength of the SPD: the CDU/CSU no longer appeared strong enough to appoint the chancellor in a two-party alliance (with the Greens), while the SPD grew strong enough in the polls to appoint the chancellor in a three-party alliance. In both cases, the FDP would play a central role: together with the Greens, it could make Armin Laschet chancellor and prevent a "left-wing government" under Olaf Scholz. The party of the free market has not been ascribed this much importance in the run-up to an election in quite some time. Lindner fuelled this importance with his demonstrative ambitions for the post of finance minister. In 2021, it is better to govern badly than not at all.

With small losses, the AfD enters the German Bundestag for the second time. It will probably no longer be the largest opposition party (unless the SPD and CDU form a coalition again). In Thuringia, where the party is led by the notorious far-right extremist Björn Höcke, it became the strongest party with 24 percent (and 5 direct seats), as well as in Saxony with 24.6 percent (and 10 direct mandates). In the other three eastern German states, its result ranged between 18 percent and 19.6 percent.

The AfD's results—together with the state election results, all of which led to a slightly weakened return to parliament—show that the party has established itself in the party system and has succeeded in building up a core electorate. This core electorate in many regions of the country seems to be linked to the formation of its own political milieus, which, by shutting themselves off from the flow of social information and public debate, have created their own information channels, group convictions, and realities. After the Bundestag elections, the party will decide on its future path: transformation into a parliamentary party that seeks to become part of a conservative bloc, or continuing as a movement party using every emerging protest against state policies as an opportunity for radicalization and hostility to democracy.

What Were Voters' Primary Concerns?

When voters were asked on election day what they were "very concerned" about, they were given a choice of topics that largely corresponded to party-political divisions: the concern that too many foreigners are coming to Germany was shared by supporters of the FDP and the AfD; the concern that Islam has too much influence was shared by the majority of AfD voters, less so by the FDP and the CDU/CSU, and also to some extent by SPD voters. Concerns about living standards were concentrated among AfD voters, as was

concern about Germany changing too much. Concern about the consequences of climate change united supporters from Die Linke to the CDU, and was also slightly predominant among the FDP, but no longer among the AfD.

Despite all the debates around social division, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the threat to the social centre, a majority of voters thought that things are "more fair" than unfair in Germany. More than two-thirds of the supporters of the CDU/CSU, the Greens, and the FDP were of this opinion, along with a slight majority of SPD supporters. Only the supporters of Die Linke and the AfD see things radically differently. A future federal government, whether led by the SPD or the CDU, would therefore be a government whose supporters consider the existing social order to be "rather fair".

The situation is different when it comes to the distribution of (economic) wealth. Here, 77 percent of all respondents and between 57 percent of CDU/CSU supporters and 96 percent of Die Linke supporters say that wealth is not distributed fairly. How can it be that only 45 percent of all (or 19 percent of CDU/CSU supporters) think that all in all things are rather unfair in Germany, but at the same time 77 percent (and 57 percent of CDU/CSU supporters) say that wealth is unfairly distributed? Unfair distribution of wealth does not necessarily shake the view that the social order as a whole is just (and thus legitimate).

These apparent contradictions in everyday consciousness continue when asked whether they would like to see "some course corrections" (51 percent), a "fundamental change" (40 percent), or "that everything essentially remains as it is" (6 percent) for the future of the country. While 21 percent more would like to see "fundamental change" compared to 2017, this figure is roughly at the same level as in 1998 and 2009, but lower than in 2005. Currently, the desire for fundamental change is highly polarized along party-political lines: supporters of Die Linke, the Greens, and the AfD would like to see this happen by two-thirds or more, and only a minority of supporters of the other parties.

However, the reasons for the electoral decision are not necessarily to be found in these views, concerns, and wishes. According to Infratest, 48 percent of SPD voters say that without Olaf Scholz they would not have voted for the SPD. This roughly corresponds to the polling figures at the end of 2020/beginning of 2021.

What Comes Next?

Regardless of who ends up forming the next government in Germany, it will have to deal with a number of political issues that were more or less treated as elephants in the room during the election campaign:

- Refugees and migration: the immigration of (skilled) workers, their integration, and their legal status are pushing their way onto the political agenda in light of the age structure of the domestic labour force, immigration to the labour market, and the unresolved refugee policy.
- Democracy as a way of life: the increasingly raw tone of everyday political life and threats to local politicians all the way to calls for murder and assassination endanger democratic conflict resolution in society and, together with identitarian communication bubbles, promote mutual exclusion instead of compromise. The deliberative, democratic principle that the other side could also be right is increasingly rarely shared, and the basis of a democratic debate, the recognition of a common reality, is being abandoned.
- The future of old-age provision and financing of the welfare state: the baby boomer generation has only just begun to enter retirement. In connection with the further digitalization of the world of work on the one hand and climate policy on the other, the conflicts along the temporal axis "for today/for the day after tomorrow" will come to a head. In other words: more and more citizens will have to be won over to political projects in the next ten years, the fruits of which they will not live to see.
- Europe and the EU as a framework for action: it is actually undisputed that central tasks such as refugees and migration, energy and climate policy, and public (digital) infrastructure can only be tackled within a European framework. Yet central issues in the further development of the European Union—an investment community, a transfer union, European collective bargaining policy, etc.—were avoided in the election campaign.
- German foreign policy: the debate on the lessons to be learned from NATO's war in Afghanistan (with a UN mandate) with German participation was postponed, although it is obvious that the US will maintain its changed attitude towards NATO, initiated under Obama and reinforced under Trump, under the new President Biden as well. What does this mean for Germany's role in the world and for European strategic foreign policy?

The coming government will be faced with the task of getting major initiatives off the ground in four years that will have a massive impact on living conditions in 20 to 30 years and beyond. Even if this task were to be tackled courageously, there is nothing to suggest that the political balance of power will stabilize under intensified conditions of transformation. Indeed, it is quite possible that the next government will only be a transitional government.

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