

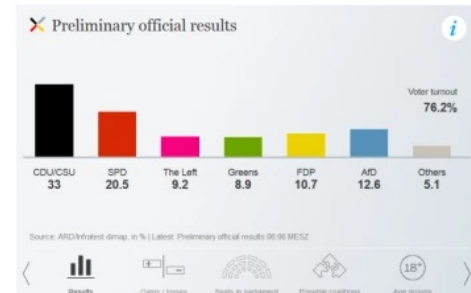
Hope trumps fear: takeaways from the German election

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Many Germans as well are fed up

The defeat in the core European country of the grand coalition of poverty, neoliberalism and market dogmatism is no small detail. Over the last years, a narrative developed counterpoising southern resistance to austerity with a supposed German love for fiscal discipline. Some commentators took a habit of speaking of German society almost as a single unity, united behind the worries of Merkel and the Bundesbank. No one entirely denied social contradictions within Germany, but more often than not, their political relevance was downplayed.

The German parliamentary election shattered the Mutti Merkel-narrative. These policies are scantily more popular amongst the German working classes than anywhere else. The “strong and stable” Angela Merkel led her party to the worst election result since 1949. Her social democratic “partners in coalition” managed to do even worse. With only about 20% of the vote, the SPD hits an all-time low. The SPD now joins the crisis of their French, Dutch, or Greek counterparts, losing heavily in economically depressed zones in the western part of Germany. Having been at the avant-garde of labour market liberalisations throughout Europe, perhaps the party only got what it had coming.



Germany is no island

The success of the AfD is the most negative take-away from the German parliamentary election. There is no way to underestimate this. Undoubtedly, as the Dutch and French far right before them, the AfD benefited greatly from the harsh electoral rhetoric on refugees and migrants, the impressive amount of airtime its core topics got in comparison to social issues and the millions of euros offered by generous albeit often anonymous donors. In a way, a certain establishment chose its opposition.

Lest however this obscure the underlying social-economic reasons behind their rise. People are fed up with neoliberal flexicurity and fiscal discipline. Notwithstanding the Goldman Sachs background of Alice Weidel, the AfD even succeeded in branding itself as the opposition, an anti-establishment party. Germany is no exception to this. Competition and austerity favoured the rise of the far right in several European countries. Policies that sow poverty, create socioeconomic deserts, and refuse to take on the 1%, encourage people to turn on one another. If investments in schools or public housing are lacking, people are pushed to compete for the existing spots. This creates fertile ground for the poison of racism and division. In the Netherlands, many citizens declared they would vote for the far right not so much out of sheer xenophobia, but because they did not understand that after years of austerity, (some) money could only be found to (badly) receive refugees. In France, the systematic undermining of social rights and the French welfare state by social democrats of the likes of say Lionel Jospin and François Hollande played no small part in the electoral successes of the Front National.

Europe: A need but unlikely change of course

What the likely discontinuation of the CDU-SPD coalition will mean for European integration is too early to say. Part of the ambitious reform proposed by French president Macron might be temporarily off the table. Nonetheless, as much as both potential CDU coalition partners disagree on the topic, clearly neither the Greens, nor the FDP offer a substantial change of course. Economic policies designed to guarantee Germany's status as Exportweltmeister will remain. The election might even boost European reform, including competitiveness or productivity authorities, designed to generalise the German surplus and export model throughout the European Union.

This is unfortunate, for the rise of the far right and the fall of mainstream parties express a call for change in economic policy. Mainstream media throughout Belgium did not fail to highlight how the so-called German model was constructed at the expense of working poor and impoverished pensioners. The model does not only hurt German workers. Within Europe, the first and most obvious victims of the strategy were found in southern European countries. Today, companies from the Netherlands or Belgium exporting to Germany gladly follow the example of wage compression. Subcontractors for German industry in Hungary, the Czech Republic or Slovakia are a full part of the German export strategies. On the longer term, this model appears unsustainable, as people will not accept the continuous increase in inequalities within and amongst European states and regions. Non-European trade partners

will not accept a structural trade deficit with either Germany or the European Union, raising fears of increasing hostilities regarding trade.

Hope should trump fear

Even within a context of an electoral shift to the right, the result of the Left should not be downplayed. Die Linke did gain about half a million votes in comparison to 2013. Obviously, it is regrettable that the left did not do better than it did, especially in the east of the country. For, in addition to its impressive campaign on public investments, pensions, and wages, Die Linke attempted to offer a different view on European policy. To the extent, however, that the success of the AfD was built on the anti-establishment feeling, with 60% voting mostly against other parties, there is also hope. Far-right parties often capitalize on these feelings effectively, but a radical social discourse did allow Mélenchon's presidential campaign to win some of the anti-establishment vote and remobilise people that had turned their back on the elections. There is no reason to think, such would be different outside electoral periods, in various social struggles.

On Facebook, Peter Mertens, the president of the Belgian Workers' Party (PTB-PVDA), did see seeds of hope: "Fortunately, there is also another Germany. A Germany of hope. That's the Germany of the employees that struggle at Amazon, in hospitals, in the postal and public services and in retail for better wages and working conditions. A Germany that advocates real public investment, like the DGB Marshallplan. A Germany of solidarity and struggle, with a long way to go, but far away from hatred, despair and defeatism." These struggles will be indispensable allies for the social movements in the Benelux or anywhere else in Europe.

Quelle: <https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/692.hope-trumps-fear-takeaways-from-the-german-election.html>