

Tough coalition talks after German elections

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The parliamentary election on 22 September ended in spectacular victory for the Christian Democrats, who would have gained an outright majority had they won only five more seats. The other parties present in the Bundestag are: the SPD, the Left Party and the Green Party. The Liberal FDP party, which formed the government coalition with the Christian Democrats up until this election, failed to enter parliament. The unexpectedly good result achieved by the CDU/CSU and the absence of their previous coalition partner; all this means that the Christian Democrats have a difficult choice to make. To form a government, they will have to enter into coalition negotiations with a grouping on the left side of the political scene: the SPD or the Green Party. Both of these parties have recently been showing a great deal of reserve even as regards opening talks with Chancellor Merkel. This may mean that it will take a very long time to form a new government. The situation the Christian Democrats are in is even more complicated, since – given the fact that they are only a few seats short of being able to govern the country by themselves – they will have to relinquish a disproportionate amount of power in comparison to the election result. Furthermore, none of the new coalitions would have a majority in the Bundesrat, where the federal states are represented and whose consent is necessary, for instance, in implementing legislation concerning European or energy issues.

A reshuffle among the political parties in Germany

The CDU/CSU have confirmed their position as the strongest grouping in the Bundestag, since they won a combined 41.5% of the vote—almost 8 percentage points more than in the previous election. The SPD also improved its result (25.7%, i.e. almost 3 percentage points more than in 2009). This is, though, much lower than the party leadership had expected. The Left Party and the Green Party received 8.6% and 8.4%, respectively. The Green Party can only see this result as a defeat; in 2011, the support level declared for them in the polls was at 28% (which was a consequence of the German public's reaction to the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster). The party which sustained the worst defeat was the FDP, garnering a mere 4.8% of votes cast (the support level for this party dropped almost 10 percentage points). This is the first time the FDP has found itself outside the Bundestag since 1949. The poor results achieved by the FDP and the Greens have triggered reshuffles in their leaderships. Philipp Rösler, the FDP's chairman, announced his resignation the day after the election. He will be replaced by the party's secretary general, Christian Lindner in the hope that he will bring the party back to its traditional liberal roots. The Green Party will also see a reshuffle. Its chairwoman, Claudia Roth, and the heads of the parliamentary grouping,

Renate Kunast and Jurgen Trittin (the party's candidate for chancellor), have announced that they will not seek re-election at the party congress in October.

Another grouping to have achieved a great success in the election, besides the Christian Democrats, was Germany's youngest party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), which was established in March 2013 in part by former Christian Democrat politicians who disagree with the European policy adopted by the CDU/CSU. The AfD was close to crossing the election threshold. It was backed by 4.7% of German voters, primarily former supporters of the FDP, the Left Party and the Christian Democratic parties. This grouping managed to channel the potential for protest present among a section of the German public against the policy being created by the largest parties. This has been proven by the fact that the support level for the AfD reached almost 6% in the new federal states, where dissatisfaction with the political situation has continuously been much stronger than in the west of the country.

Why the Christian Democrats won

The Christian Democrats owe their success primarily to Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose popularity formed the basis for their entire election campaign. The chancellor avoided confrontation with the counter-candidates and made emphasising the merits of the previous government the crux of her campaign. She also promised to continue her previous policies and thus to provide stability. Her tactic of taking over popular social issues from all the other parties (a pro-family policy, the minimum wage and the *Energiewende*) and presenting solutions to these problems as if they were developed by the Christian Democrats brought the desired result. Chancellor Merkel's appeal to the Christian Democrat electorate to vote for both direct candidates and the party lists of the CDU and the CSU also turned out to be a success. In the previous election to the Bundestag, many Christian Democrat supporters voted tactically for the FDP party lists so as to ensure that the Christian Democrat/Liberal coalition was formed. This time the Christian Democrats took over approximately 40% of the votes cast for the FDP in 2009. They also proved to be the most popular among those who did not vote in previous elections (8%). The Christian Democrats were also backed by 9% of those who had previously voted for the SPD and also 9% who had voted for the Green Party. What also contributed to the success of the CDU and the CSU was the strengthening position of the Bavarian Christian Democrats (CSU), with whom the CDU has traditionally formed a parliamentary club in the Bundestag. The CSU won 65.8% of the votes in Bavaria, the only federal state where it operates. This has definitely reinforced the position of the CSU's head, Horst Seehofer; and Chancellor Merkel will have to take this into account during coalition talks and during the formation of the future cabinet.

Possible coalition scenarios

Politicians are watching the negotiations following the local parliamentary election in Hesse with great interest. This was held in parallel to the election to the Bundestag. The CDU, in coalition with the FDP, also won there. The FDP managed to enter the parliament in Hesse, but it gained too few seats to be able to continue co-operation with the Christian Democrats. Three scenarios are possible in Hesse: a coalition formed by the CDU and the SPD; by the CDU and the Green Party; and by the SPD, the Green Party and the Left Party. This means

that negotiations in Hesse are seen as a portent of a similar scenario at the federal level.

1. The CDU/CSU-SPD grand coalition

This version seems to be the most likely, given the public support and the vast majority a coalition like this would have in the Bundestag. The two parties have already co-operated in a government led by Angela Merkel (2005–2009). However, the SPD paid a high price for its co-operation with the Christian Democrats (its support ratings took a long-term hit of double digit percentage points). Under Merkel's leadership, the CDU has taken over the topics which had been seen as the typical domain of the political left, such as: social or family policy and climate protection, including Germany's energy transformation. However, remembering the negative experiences of the coalition with the CDU/CSU, the Social Democrats will be making efforts to be seen as a strong and equal coalition partner, and will offer the Christian Democrats tough conditions regarding government policy and ministerial positions. The SPD will probably insist that provisions for introducing the minimum wage, curbing employment based on overly-flexible contracts and raising the highest tax rate be included in the coalition agreement. The Social Democrats may also demand positions in the Ministry of Finance and the creation of a Ministry for Energy, the key ministries from the point of view of the Christian Democrats' priorities for the next four years. This would be a high price for the Christian Democrats to pay for the few seats they are missing. A coalition with the CDU/CSU would also be inconvenient for the Social Democrats, who would have to confront a very strong left-wing parliamentary opposition (the Green Party and the Left Party). Given the present balance of powers in the second house, the Bundesrat, the grand coalition would have 24 votes there (it would need 11 votes more to have an outright majority). This is because representatives of local governments led by left-wing parties predominate in the Bundesrat (see Appendix 1). As a rule, representatives of those local coalition governments where only one party is represented in the federal government abstain from voting.

2. The CDU/CSU-Green Party coalition

This would set a precedent at the federal level. The Christian Democrats and the Greens have converging views on climate and energy policies and this would significantly facilitate their co-operation in the government. Since their position has weakened following the election, the Greens could prove quite a convenient partner for Chancellor Merkel (they will form the smallest faction in the Bundestag, and part of their leadership have announced they will not seek re-election in the party's leadership). By capitalising on this debilitation of the Greens, the Christian Democrats could impose their own projects upon them and would not have to make difficult concessions during coalition negotiations. The arguments against the CDU/CSU-Green Party coalition include the differences in their outlooks (the attitude towards gay marriage and integration policy) and in fiscal policy issues, as well as the personal animosity of party officials, who might not back a solution of this kind. Given the fact that the FDP, who are a political base for business circles, are no longer in the Bundestag, it should also not be ruled out that part of Christian Democrats will have to play this role more actively, which will give rise to conflicts with the Greens. Opinions from the CSU ruling out co-operation with the Greens were heard already one day after the election. However, this may also be seen as an element of Seehofer's negotiation strategy, and

everything will depend on support for this solution from a majority of the members of these parties. One real obstacle to a CDU-Green coalition being formed would be very low support in the Bundesrat—11 votes at most.

3. Failed Christian Democrat coalition negotiations

A scenario in which the Christian Democrats fail to strike a deal with either the Social Democrats or the Greens is unlikely. The failure of coalition negotiations in Berlin would mean the possibility of a new election being scheduled and this would be a risky solution for all parties. The Christian Democrats' good result is a clear sign of voters' support for the continuation of Angela Merkel's rule as chancellor. Should coalition talks end without result, this would be seen as a sign of disrespect, especially from the left-wing parties, of the will of the electorate; and this could result in reduced turnout and support during the next election. The unexpectedly high level of support for Alternative for Germany, which is seen as a protest party, also suggests that this party could enter the Bundestag after the next election and this would totally upset the balance in parliament. The conservative AfD would provide strong opposition to the Christian Democrats on the right side of the political scene. If the party manages to maintain its popularity, it is almost certain that it will cross the three-percent threshold in the election to the European parliament in May 2014.

Appendix 1

The balance of power in the Bundesrat (69 total votes/ outright majority of 35 votes)

CDU/CSU-SPD: 28 votes; if a CDU/SPD local government is formed in Hesse, then 33 votes

CDU-Greens: 6 votes; if a CDU-Green local government is formed in Hesse, then 11 votes

Federal state	Government	Number of votes
Baden-Württemberg	SPD-Greens	6
Brandenburg	SPD-Left Party	4
Bremen	SPD-Greens	3
Hamburg	SPD	3
Lower Saxony	SPD-Greens	6
North Rhine-Westphalia	SPD-Greens	6

Federal state	Government	Number of votes
Rhineland-Palatinate	SPD-Greens	4
Schleswig-Holstein	SPD-Greens	4
Berlin	CDU-SPD	4
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	CDU-SPD	3
Saarland	CDU-SPD	3
Saxony-Anhalt	CDU-SPD	4
Thuringia	CDU-SPD	4
Bavaria	CSU	6
Hesse	CDU-Greens or CDU-SPD or SPD-Greens-Left Party	5
Saxony	CDU-FDP	4

Appendix 2

The strength of potential coalitions in the Bundestag based on the number of seats won by each party

