The German Election: Undramatic but Crucial

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Germany will hold federal elections on September 22. As of now, little surprises are expected. A center right alliance between the CDU/CSU and the FDP would ensure a third four-year term for Chancellor Angela Merkel. SPD leaders ruled out an alliance with the Left or a Grand Coalition with the CDU/CSU. Helped only by the Greens, the SPD will not have enough votes to ensure the Chancellor Job for their candidate, Peer Steinbrück.

Germany’s Political Landscape

CDU: The Christian Democratic Union is a center right conservative party. Its sister party is the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria, the only state where the CDU does not operate. Both parties are members of the European People’s Party (EPP) in the European Parliament.

FDP: The Free Democratic Party is a business friendly, classical liberal party. It has often been the coalition partner for the CDU/CSU.

SPD: The Social Democratic Party is a center left party. It is a member of the Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament.


Die Linke: The Left is the successor of the communist party in East Germany, the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands). It is a member of the Party of the European Left in the European Parliament.

Lessons and Coalitions

German politicians have learned some lessons from the past. The fragmentation of political parties in the Weimar Republic enabled the rise of the Nazi party in the 1930s. After WWII, a “five percent hurdle” was put into Germany’s election law: a party must at least receive five percent (or three directly elected seats) of the national vote. Since then, the country has had a tradition of alliances, even between big parties at opposite sides of the political spectrum. For example: the two main political opponents CDU/CSU and SPD “co-habited” in a Grand Coalition from 2005 to 2009.

Campaign Issues

At 58%, Angela Merkel’s popularity in Germany continues to rise, according to a poll by Deutschlandtrend. Peer Steinbrück’s popularity is at a low 27%. His party, the SPD, is failing to differentiate its policies and campaign messages from those of the CDU/CSU.

The SPD has focused on the “big three”: Child Care, Wages, and Rent Increases. The CDU, who governed from 2009-2013, has already stolen those issues. In August, a new law went into effect guaranteeing daycare for all children over the age of one. Steinbrück announced a “National Plan of Action for Habitation and Urban Development” calling for a revival in low-income housing construction. Meanwhile, another new law preventing excessive rent hikes was supported even by the pro-business FDP. The SPD and the Greens are pushing for the introduction of a minimum wage of €8.50. Germany does not have a minimum wage requirement yet. Chancellor Merkel’s plan calls for different
minimum wages by region and industrial sector. Her argument is that a universal minimum wage would endanger jobs.

The SPD is also failing to gain enough mileage from the NSA spying scandal. Germany was the most snooped country in the European Union by the American NSA. The SPD accused Merkel of being directly responsible for that as chief of Germany’s BND (Bundesnachrichtendienst). The CDU was quick to point out that the collaboration between the NSA and the BND started during the 1998-2005 Schröder administration (SPD) after the September 11 attacks.

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The crucial question in the German elections is the European one, and the candidates are not addressing it. Amid the financial meltdown, German tax payers’ money has been used to bail out struggling “Club Med” countries (Greece, Cyprus, Spain, and Portugal). While Merkel’s popularity is at an all-time high, so is the discontent with the bailout programs. Euro sceptic parties such as the “Alternative for Germany” party may get less than the 5% necessary to make it into the Bundestag. However, the Euro sceptic wing within the governing coalition is strong and expected to grow all around. Since some MPs are elected directly, it is unknown how many Euro sceptic MPs will be in the next Bundestag. In the past, Merkel had to rely on SPD votes to pass important legislation like the bailout packages for Greece.

According to British historian and Oxford professor Timothy Garton Ash, Italy’s Andreotti and France’s Mitterand pressed in the early 1990s for a quick monetary solution to the power of the Deutsche Mark. In fact, the Euro was meant to reign in and contain a newly unified Germany within the framework of the EU. Today, Germany is the surprise (and reluctant) winner in the Eurozone, an “anchor of stability” and a country, which is increasingly asked to lead the EU. Of course, that includes paying the bill. “I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity” said Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski in 2011. Ash is wondering: Can Germany lead in the EU without hegemonic dominance? He asks: Can German politicians invigorate and generate enthusiasm and renewed hope for the European project?
EuroPoint: For good or bad, Germany is the EU’s economic engine today. More important than the CDU-SPD rivalry is what happens after the election: will the new government in Berlin commit itself to the political and democratic advancement of the EU? For more on our perspective, see also EuroPoint’s country profile for Germany.