

Bittersweet Merkel victory amid far-right surge

By [James Hare](#), Features Editor (2018)

Tuesday 3 October 2017



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On Sunday 24 September, the people of Germany went to the polls in typically efficient fashion to elect members to the 19th Bundestag. Normally German elections are relatively predictable affair. But by the time the votes were counted, it was clear a seismic shock had been struck to the German political system. The major parties - the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) - had suffered their worst ever results while the Free Democratic Party (FDP) bounced back from total wipeout in 2013, and the far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) entered the Bundestag for the first time.

The collapse in support for the CDU and SPD can be easily understood. In the case of the CDU and their Bavarian partners, the CSU, it can be seen as a backlash against their time in government - as one would expect of any party that has been in power for 12 years. The majority of their votes were hemorrhaged firstly to the FDP in the south, a reaction in part to the more interventionist approach of the Merkel administration, and secondly to the AfD in the east, where conservative voters felt left behind by the CDU.

Yet the CDU remained the largest party and will be able to form a government. For the SPD, there is no silver lining on their cloud. They shed voters in almost equal proportion to all the other parties except from the CDU, and their losses were relatively evenly distributed geographically, telling the story of a party that was seen as tainted by coalition, and lacking in new ideas. Furthermore, in areas with high levels of unemployment (an indicator for the most deprived communities) the SPD found their traditional base deserting them, a further symptom of the global crisis of Social Democracy.

As has already been mentioned the AfD and FDP made gains from the major parties, but that does not

quite tell the entire story. The largest proportion of AfD supporters were non-voters in 2013, suggesting that the party has tapped into a seam of citizens that previously felt politically disenfranchised. Many of their gains also came from Die Linke, literally "The Left" in the east, a replication of the Labour to UKIP voter flow seen among working class voters in the UK. Yet interestingly, the AfD vote share negatively correlated with levels of immigration in an area. One would be inclined then to suggest that the prevailing sentiment the AfD has tied itself to is that of German nationalism – a feeling always strongest in the old Prussian crown-lands of the east.

For the FDP the picture is somewhat similar, with previous non-voters being their second largest source of support. The largest source of support for the FDP was prior CDU and CSU voters, with the CSU particularly badly hit – the FDP performing at their strongest in the wealthier south, of which Bavaria is of course the largest part. As a result of this, they now seem to be headed back into government as a junior partner to the CDU/CSU alliance.

Which leads onto the next point, about the makeup of the Bundestag and the German Federal Government for the next four years. This is the biggest ever Bundestag with 709 members, and mixed in with the addition of the AfD it promises to be a very different atmosphere within the chamber, definitely one that is somewhat more raucous than in the past. That thought has clearly already hit the leadership of the CDU with the move of the bane of the Hellenes, Wolfgang Schauble, from the finance ministry to become Speaker of the Bundestag. A ferocious and well-respected figure, many fear that he may have his work cut out for him in his new role.

In all likelihood, the Federal Government will take the form of the so-called "Jamaica" coalition – the CDU/CSU, the FDP and the Greens. There are still issues to be resolved there, with the left-wing of the Greens not too keen on working with the CDU, and the FDP against the plans for further European economic integration set out by Emmanuel Macron that Merkel has offered tacit backing to. But German politics has faced these challenges before, and dealt with them smoothly – one would expect the same to be the case this time around.



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