

VOLUME 2

Angela Merkel's Test

This past week saw Germany hold federal elections for the Bundestag, the national parliament.



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By Avi Dravid and Xinyang Zhou

This past week saw Germany hold federal elections for the Bundestag, the national parliament. The center-right Christian Democrat Union (CDU) gained 33% of the vote, essentially securing Angela Merkel's fourth term as chancellor. The Social Democrats (SPD) secured 20.5% votes, retaining their position as the Bundestag's second largest party. However, both parties saw their vote share drop precipitously since the last election, marking the decline of public support for Germany's traditional parties and an upswing in support for more radical political alternatives.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained 12.6% of the vote and secured 88 seats in the parliament, almost half of those previously held by the SPD. After their strong electoral showing, AfD will enter parliament for the first time and become its third largest party. In many ways, the rise of AfD is unprecedented in modern German politics, as the radical right has lacked a voice in the Bundestag since 1961 thanks to a combination of laws and social norms. This most recent election result reflects deepening divides among the German electorate and casts a shadow on the future of the inscrutable Ms Merkel.

Since taking over in 2005 and, during her three terms in office, Germany has become an economic powerhouse^[1]. German unemployment fell to 5.7% in August of 2017, the lowest level since 1990. Cushioned by low inflation and a budget surplus, the German economy managed to stay above the Eurozone crisis and became the core engine of growth in Europe.

However, Germany's economic success masks deep fissures, which surfaced during this federal election. Unease with globalization, migration

Greece have voiced their opposition through the ballot box by voting for AfD. Consistent with the message of other populist parties throughout Europe, AfD claims to represent the “forgotten man”, and eschews the internationalist orientation of both the CDU and SPD.

At the core of the AfD’s populism lies a deep distrust of Ms Merkel’s “open door” migrant policy, under which over one million refugees have been granted asylum. While many Germans initially supported the move on humanitarian grounds, concerns about terrorism, integration and the availability of jobs have eaten away at public support, hampering support for the CDU and undermining Ms Merkel’s authority.

Resurgent German nationalism has made the normally above-the-fray Ms Merkel the target of public criticism. After the CDU’s disastrous result in the 2016 Berlin state elections, Ms Merkel publicly expressed her regret, admitting that she would do better “rewinding time”. However, her stated regret was not accompanied by any substantive policy changes, as the government continued to keep German borders open to incoming refugees. The issue has proven to be contentious, causing divisions within Ms Merkel’s own CDU.

Once heralded as a beacon of openness and globalism in a Europe that seemed to be reverting to parochial nationalism, Germany now finds itself at a political crossroads. Exposed to the same pressures as many other Western countries, traditional party structures find themselves at risk as fringe alternatives push their way into the mainstream. Addressing her supporters on election night, Ms Merkel thanked them but also called the result “not as good as we had expected” and promised to listen to the concerns of AfD voters in order to win them back^[2]. Only time will tell whether this is only a temporary surge or a more permanent realignment.

2. Rankin, J. (2017). "The eurozone strikes back – why Europe is booming again," the Guardian. Archived at <https://perma.cc/6KCB-Q4EH> ↵

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