

Can Greens and Liberals Usher in a New Political Era in Germany?

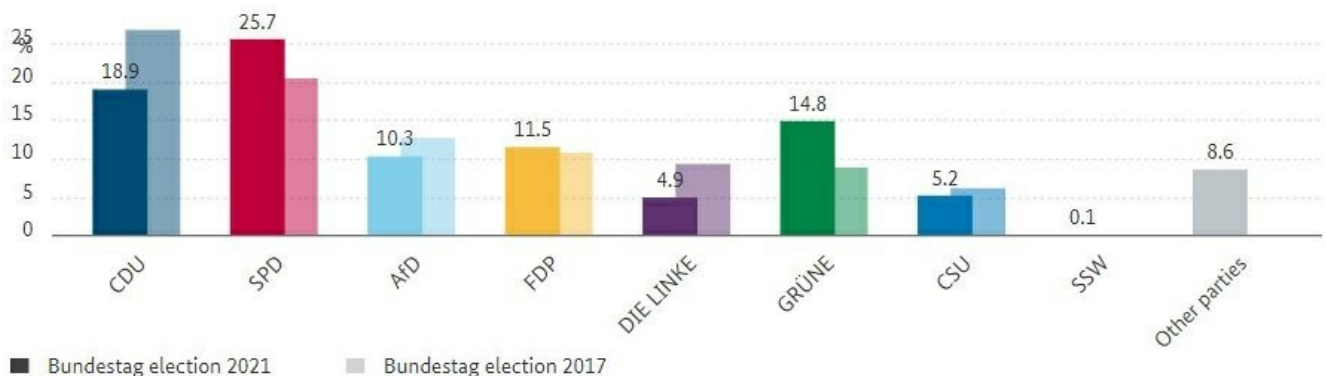
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Germany has voted and the federal elections in September have brought to the fore a new politics defined by two trends: the “Dutchification” and “Americanisation” of German politics. Roderick Kefferpütz reviews the Green election campaign and the emergence of Greens and Liberals as key political players. Can the Greens and the Liberals work together as modernisers in a future coalition?

In September’s German federal election, the Greens achieved the seemingly impossible: they won and lost. Coming in third place with 14.8 per cent, they received their best result. They also won 16 direct mandates in local districts, a milestone that underlines how Greens have become a credible option for voters. At the same time, it was a far cry from their ambition to win the chancellery. In April, they were polling at 26 per cent. Given this context, their historic result has carried a bitter-sweet note; euphoria mixed with a dash of disappointment. They have become kingmakers, not kings.

Percentage of second votes

Bundestag election 2021, Germany
Final result



The Federal Returning Office, Wiesbaden 2021

Campaigning under pressure

There are several factors for why the Greens stumbled in this “Himalayan death zone of politics”, as Joschka Fischer, former Green Foreign Minister of Germany, used to describe the highest echelons of political competition.

First, they weren’t fully prepared for it. It was the first time the Greens were gunning for the chancellery and had a serious shot at winning it. Their claim to the chancellery, running a campaign that proposed massive changes, was an assault to deeply entrenched establishment interests. As a consequence, there was a ferocious pushback, and the Greens didn’t seem ready

for it. They had underestimated the viciousness of the attacks. They thought they could run a rational campaign focused on content and issues, staying above the fray – not realising that when you run for the chancellorship it's a different game. Content and issues are secondary.

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The opposition looked for every chink in Annalena Baerbock's armour, searching for weaknesses to discredit her. And they found them. As it turned out, Baerbock's CV had been exaggerated and had to be updated numerous times, and a book she published during the campaign turned out to contain passages copied from other sources without acknowledgement. These planted seeds of doubt and an image of dishonesty, damaging her credibility.

In this situation, they lost their stature and were no longer agents driving the agenda. The Greens were no longer able to concentrate on their own game and telling their own story. They were forced into defence when they should have stayed on the attack.

Second, their narrative was no longer catching on. Their key narrative focusing on the need for radical changes, was no longer finding a large reception. People entered a pandemic-induced fatigue and just wanted to get on with their lives. They longed for normalcy, an old business-as-usual. Under these circumstances, the call for more change wasn't attractive. A more careful recalibration of the message, balancing continuity and change, might have been appropriate. Indeed, this was a message that Winfried Kretschmann, Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, successfully ran on in the Baden-Württemberg state elections in early 2021, arguing that changes are necessary but that he would promote them in an orderly and responsible fashion. Olaf Scholz, chancellor candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Finance Minister in the Merkel cabinet, grasped voters' desire for business-as-usual with a few changes and portrayed himself as a pragmatic, safe pair of hands who wouldn't rock the boat. He presented himself as Merkel's natural heir, quoting her most famous election campaign line from 2013 ("you know me") and holding his hands in the famous "Merkel rhombus" gesture.

As the Greens began to descend in the polls, they also quickly pivoted away from their message and onto the one issue that defines them: climate change. In doing so, they unofficially withdrew from the race for the chancellorship. When Greens only focus on climate change, they become a one-issue party. That is a party that can be a partner in a coalition, but not a party that offers society an orientation and that can occupy the chancellor's office. The same happened in the last election in 2017. Losing ground in the polls, the Greens went full tilt on climate change. This defensive strategy can secure baseline supporters. But it doesn't let you break out and win over new constituencies, let alone large swathes of society.

Last but not least, some have pointed to organisational and personnel issues. The campaign posters did not find much resonance and their election TV ad received heavy criticism. The campaign suffered from infighting and blame games. Meanwhile, the party Co-Chair Robert Habeck lacked a clear role in the campaign.

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Confirming a new political landscape

The German Greens went into the election full of promise but got mangled as the race progressed. In spite of falling short of their electoral goals, they have become kingmakers. At the time of writing, they are negotiating a so-called “traffic light” coalition, with the winner of the election, the socialist SPD (25.7 per cent), and the other kingmaker, the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) (11.5 per cent).

This is history in the making. It is the first time in unified Germany that three distinct parties are expected to rule together in a governing coalition. It is a sign that the political landscape has fundamentally changed, with two notable developments.

First, the SPD and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) can no longer label themselves people's parties. They have steadily lost electoral ground over the years. As society has become more individualised and diverse over time, these parties can no longer cover the diverse spectrum of interests. Back in the 1970s, these so-called *Volksparteien* (people's party) would together take 90 per cent of the vote. Only three parties were represented in the Bundestag back then. Fast forward to today and they barely make 50 per cent, with the number of political parties in the Bundestag having doubled to six. Robert Habeck has highlighted the new difficulty in comprehensively addressing a diverse society by arguing that “we have to find a language, a form of politics, that doesn't try to reverse the degree of individualisation people have already had long in their lives, but accepts it, while bringing it into a new form of collectivity.”

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Dutchification meets Americanisation

With the demise of the German *Volksparteien* we are seeing a “Dutchification” of the German political system. Germany has a range of similarly polling, mid-sized parties, which requires new forms of coalitions. On the regional *Länder* level this has already become the norm, with multi-coloured three-party governing coalitions emerging.

However, there is also the danger that people's parties will be replaced by “persona parties”. German politics has somewhat fallen down an American political trajectory of personalised politics. The leaders of political parties have become the dominant factor. The election campaign was candidate centric. Never before has there been such a level of personalisation in a German election. As it centred on the candidates, the election became about who could destroy the credibility of the other candidates and remain standing without a sliver of reputational damage. No holds barred. No stone was left unturned when it came to finding mistakes in Annalena Baerbock's CV or copied passages in her book, no opportunity was spared when it came to ridiculing the CDU chancellor candidate Armin Laschet.

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Olaf Scholz was successful because he remained silent and waited on the sidelines out of the limelight. Only when the Green and Conservative candidates had been sufficiently discredited did he emerge as the last man standing. In the final weeks of campaigning, mob attention then turned to him and there were serious efforts by the CDU to damage his credibility by highlighting that the Wirecard fraud scandal took place under his watch and his involvement in the “Cum Ex” dividend scandal.

While the trend of a Dutchification of German politics has a democratic character, increasing competition between the parties and requiring more complex coalition-building, the person-centric Americanisation of German politics has authoritarian tendencies. It puts all the attention on the leadership, turning political parties into empty vessels.

Politics is reduced to a media circus surrounding a political candidate and not about issues or the pursuit of ideas, interests, and convictions. A kind of Survivorreality TV show where voters are either enthralled and fascinated by their candidate, or they see them for their flaws, faults, and failings. Less democratic politics, more a spectator sport, it brings fickleness into the electorate. A political candidate can be a winner today and loser tomorrow. During this election there seemed to be a sizeable bloc of frustrated voters that shifted from the CDU/CSU to the Greens and back again before finally settling partially with the SPD. Whose voters will they be tomorrow?

The Dutchification of German politics also carries the risk with it that political parties might drift off into extremes, in the hope of distinguishing themselves from others. This is a real risk that the CDU/CSU is currently facing.

In this federal election, the Conservatives have received their worst-ever result in history. Leaderless and without strategic orientation, they are in crisis. They don't know who they are and what they are supposed to stand for anymore. Who will fill this vacuum? The charismatic Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder, known for an authoritative style of politics (and who due to impatience failed to become chancellor candidate of the CDU/CSU), is likely to play an important role. Much will depend on the upcoming leadership contest, which pits the modernists represented by former Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen against the more conservative Friedrich Merz, both of which participated in the last election and lost to the centrist candidate Armin Laschet. Younger politicians will also try to gain more influence. These have in the last couple of years been able to gain a political profile because they stood in opposition to Merkel. As Merkel took very centrist positions, many young CDU politicians were able to distinguish themselves by moving more to the right. And these forces, will be part of shaping the future of the party.

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Where next for the German Greens?

This is uncharted territory for Germany's political parties. Yet, as argued in an earlier article on the development of the German Greens, this new political landscape could be favourable to the Greens.

They are one of the centre parties and are key to forming governing coalitions on the regional level in Germany. Able to work with left and right, their manoeuvrability is a strength provided they can justify it and retain a clear political profile. Their greatest risk is to be seen as political opportunists, who will work with anybody for political power. They are particularly facing this risk now. In the context of the coalition negotiations, the Greens are already coming in for criticism after giving up demands such as a speed limit on motorways as well as tax increases, without so far getting clear guarantees that Germany will phase-out coal earlier than expected. As the second strongest party in this coalition, they are in a very difficult situation. The FDP has made a major step in crossing the aisle to join the Social Democrats and Greens, so naturally they have received more attention and leeway in the negotiations. So far, the FDP are considered the big winners, while the Greens are struggling to demonstrate what they are getting out of this coalition. This dangerous situation risks feeding the narrative that sees the Greens as power hungry even at the cost of much of their agenda.

If the Greens can change this perception and demonstrate some victories, they will by and large have time on their side when it comes to their future growth. The two parties that stood clearly for political change – the Greens and the FDP – led amongst young voters. While the biggest voting bloc for the CDU/CSU and SPD is the 60+ age group.

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This election provides the Greens with a springboard to launch another challenge for the chancellorship in 2025. They have significantly increased their vote share, which will provide them with greater party financing and staff resources. If they enter the government, they will also gain new governmental experience again after 16 years out of power and more media exposure. The 16 direct mandates also shows that their hard work on the local level is paying off. While they once hovered around 8-per-cent support, this is an opportunity for the Greens to break out and start with a new 15-per-cent baseline, with the potential to reach into the mid-20s.

Kingmakers can hold more power than kings

So far, the Greens have made the best out of this new political landscape. They have understood that in a political system in flux, where several parties are all in similar polling territory, power is fluid and doesn't lie in the hands of the winner.

They have shown that kingmakers can sometimes have more power than kings. Instead of immediately entering talks with the SPD, they crossed the aisle and sat down with the free-market Liberals – the other kingmaker – to jointly flex their muscles. They let everyone know: Greens and FDP together hold more seats than the SPD in this new Bundestag (210 compared to the SPD's 206). They have played this post-election endgame well.

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Following in this vein, they will also demand a new style of coalition politics in government. The old model of one majority party and one junior partner – often labelled a system of *Koch und Kellner* (cook and service staff) – is over. In a three-party coalition, there will be a need for more coordination and complex negotiations. It will not be smooth sailing for the chancellor.

Achieving change is important for the Greens. They have received a mandate to modernise Germany's economic system and successfully manage the green industrial transformation. Germany is facing immense challenges. It has not digitalised its industry and society sufficiently and is losing out in the race for sustainability. Decarbonisation and digitalisation will be on the top of the political agenda, in addition to defining Germany's foreign policy in the new geopolitical systemic conflict between the US and China.

The German Greens will, together with the Liberals, have to push the status-quo Socialists out of their comfort zone and drive this prospective governing coalition forward. Much will depend on them. Together they could be an interesting political match that challenges and overcomes the traditional left-right divide in Europe. In Belgium, it was the quiet coordination between Greens and Liberals that helped unlock the negotiations for the federal government in 2020. In other countries too, their cooperation could help push shared political interests. When it comes to safeguarding individual rights and freedoms with regard to big tech or defending human rights, they have often sung from a similar hymn sheet. However, major disagreements remain over the economy and the path to climate neutrality. While Greens advocate strict regulations and standards, the Liberals prefer a more *laissez-faire* market-based approach.

The world is facing two grand challenges in this century: averting climate catastrophe and preserving freedom and individual rights. Could Greens and Liberals join forces to overcome these challenges in a manner where both can carry political victories? Or will old stereotypes, ideological differences, and political manoeuvring prevail?



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