

Will the elections set Germany on a path towards a socio-ecological market society?

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The political choices Germany faces in the coming years – on issues such as the environment, the economy, and the significance of freedom – will be of great consequence. Will the next chancellor be up to the task? And what kind of coalition agreements are likely to be on table? In the second of a two-part series, Reinhard Olschanski looks at the contenders and potential scenarios, and sets out what is at stake.

The Greens in Germany are fighting to become a leading force in the federal election for the first time. But the 2021 Bundestag election campaign is not just about winning the chancellorship, but also establishing hegemony in the centre-left. The question is whether social democracy can reclaim its ancestral place as leader of the centre-left, or whether the Greens will establish themselves permanently. After so many years in power, are the Social Democrats (SPD) temporarily weakened or permanently damaged? Since 1998, they have governed in coalitions for a total of 19 years; seven as the party of the chancellor (Gerhard Schröder) and 12 under Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Is the rise of the Greens a sign of a major turning point – in the Federal Republic and perhaps even beyond?

Ecology and hegemony on the centre-left

There is some evidence that the rise of the Greens, within Germany and elsewhere, represents a trend away from a culturally more homogeneous, social democratic, and labourist left and towards a more culturally plural and ecological centre-left orientation. Ecology, the first core brand of the Greens, has morphed into a political paradigm of its own over the past 50 years. It has set itself alongside the older paradigms of liberalism, socialism, and conservatism, becoming associated with issues such as the fight against nuclear power, climate and biodiversity, sustainable development, mobility, and food and nutrition, and has successfully reformulated many of the issues of the older paradigms as well. Given the current centrality of ecology, it is surprising it has taken 200 years for the ecological question to join the social question as a fundamental issue of industrial modernity.

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In retrospect, socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, despite their familiar differences,

were always united by a common meta-ideology: industrialism. Nature appeared as the arbitrarily exploitable Other, as dead clod. Romanticism and the life reform movement had already pointed out the blind spots of this industrialist worldview. But they were always considered only as marginal currents, whereas today global warming and species extinction fundamentally call into question human living conditions and require fundamental social and economic changes to be made.

The Fridays for Future movement provided an additional impetus to ecology's rise to prominence. The movement demanded that the self-declared "climate chancellor" Merkel honour the commitment to effective climate protection she had made at the beginning of her term and when she signed the Paris Climate Agreement. The students' criticism that the government was gambling away the future of the young generation made a great impact upon the political system. The CDU/CSU and SPD quickly negotiated a new climate law and, at the insistence of the Greens, went even further than their original plans.

The Federal Constitutional Court took the same line as the activists. In a landmark ruling, it partially overturned the new climate law, and thus backed up the activists' political and moral claims with a legally binding interpretation of the constitution. The court put the onus on policymakers to demonstrably deliver the German share pledged in the Paris Agreement. For the court, putting this problem on the back burner meant placing an excessive burden on future generations and restricting their freedom. Through this legal mechanism, climate protection is now also explicitly referred to as the protection of freedom in German jurisprudence. The ruling is a mandate for greatly strengthened climate protection and goes beyond the matter at hand to provide a legal basis for the new, expanded logic of the Federal Republic. It sets a course whereby politicians need to commit to bringing the new basic ecological consensus, that has long been emerging in society, to bear.

A new understanding of freedom

The ruling is also important for a contemporary understanding of freedom, a concept central to the German Constitution, and thus provides clues to the definition of what a liberal society can be today. The philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel fought all his life against views that equated freedom with arbitrariness and impulses. He was referring not least to representatives of contemporary Romanticism. But today's populists and market radicals, those who identify prohibition and tyranny in every rule, from social and environmental legislation to face masks, also fit in the same category.

In Germany, the main representative of such a narrow conception of freedom is the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). But even the market-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) has formulated a watered-down variant of this rhetoric. Without calling the liberal constitution into question, its communication stirs up opposition and taps into the population's fatigue with the pandemic. In the longer term, the focus is on aversion to state regulation, particularly widespread among the FDP's clientele of the liberal professions and small and medium-sized businesses. If the CDU/CSU were one day to suffer the historic decline that has hit other Christian Democrat parties in Europe, not only the AfD but also the FDP would be likely to benefit.

The FDP abandoned the social liberal path to the present a good 40 years ago, during the Reagan and Thatcher eras, when it marginalised its left wing. By doing so, the Greens were

able to take the left-liberal field largely without a fight, and the Greens subsequently developed it into their second core brand, alongside ecology. Today, after a long phase of cultural change and despite all the authoritarian countertendencies, social liberalism is deeply attractive to a large section of society. It therefore further increases the Greens' chances of becoming the hegemonic force on the centre-left.

Meanwhile, market-radical liberalism appears tarnished but, as seen in the Trump administration or parts of the AfD, it can succeed in a dangerous mix with populism. The basic political opposition of the future may be between ecological-left-liberal and populist-market-radical positions.

Distortions on the Right and the Left

The pluralisation of the party system is leading to increasingly colourful coalitions at the state level in Germany. Only the AfD remains largely on the sidelines. However, the election of an FDP politician as prime minister of Thuringia with votes from the CDU and the AfD showed that there are also forces in the CDU/CSU and FDP that are willing to cooperate with the far right. Although the episode in Thuringia ended with the swift resignation of the incumbent after nationwide protests, it is a dangerous development for the post-Merkel era. The opening of the CDU/CSU to right-wing populism as seen among the American Republicans is not an imminent threat in Germany, but it remains conceivable in the medium and longer term. One recent positive sign is that Reiner Haseloff, the CDU prime minister of Saxony-Anhalt, an eastern and more rural state, convincingly won his state election by distancing himself from the AfD.

After its populist adventure with the AfD, the CDU in Thuringia cooperated in the re-election of the popular, pragmatic Die Linke (The Left Party) politician Bodo Ramelow as prime minister. Nevertheless, the left wing of Die Linke, especially in western Germany, persists in radical positions that isolate the party. This wing still calls for Germany's withdrawal from NATO and an opening towards Putin's Russia. These stances currently rule out a government majority with the Greens and SPD – even if it were numerically possible. Some previously left-wing voters have now turned to the AfD, and left-wing figures such as former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine and his wife Sahra Wagenknecht want to win back these votes with a mixture of socialist and nationalist rhetoric. The debate has further split the party and, against this backdrop, Die Linke may fail to clear the 5 per cent threshold in September.

Colour games

As things stand, only the CDU/CSU, the Greens, the SPD, and the FDP remain as potential coalition partners. A new grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD is rather unlikely because of the deep fatigue within social democracy but also because it may not have the numbers. Speculation about a “German” coalition, a black-red-yellow coalition of the CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP, is more of a thought experiment entertained for tactical reasons. Such a constellation would look like a posthumous extension of the grand coalition.

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government.

A two-party coalition of the CDU/CSU supported by the FDP would be straightforward but the parties will struggle to win a joint majority. A new edition of the failed Jamaica coalition (black-yellow-green) attempt of 2017 is more likely. But equally likely is a two-party black-green coalition, which looks numerically achievable. For the Greens, taking the chancellorship for the first time is of course tempting and does not seem out of the question in a Green “traffic light” coalition with the SPD and FDP. The SPD naturally dreams of a traffic light under its leadership in the event of the party overtaking the Greens.

With poll numbers around 30 per cent, which are very weak for the CDU/CSU, the party is still well ahead of the Greens. So it is unlikely that the Greens will push ahead of the CDU/CSU and lead a green-black government. Moreover, it would be a serious challenge to the ego of the old conservative People’s Party. In Baden-Württemberg, the Greens have just entered into a coalition with the CDU for the second time after winning 33 per cent in the state elections in spring, proving that in principle this option can work. But in the federal government the weights are distributed differently, so that even a result of around 20 per cent would be a success for the Greens – after a rather meagre 8.9 per cent in 2017. For many observers, therefore, black-green is the most likely combination.

The socio-ecological market economy: A new social compromise?

Regardless of the colours involved, in terms of content, an ecological turnaround in politics is likely to prevail. The 2020s will see an ambitious push for reform around ecology and sustainability, involving a comprehensive decarbonisation of the economy and everyday life, a rapid expansion of renewables, a reinvention of mobility, and a turn toward more sustainable agriculture. These are the widely shared aspirations for the next government. In the best case, steps for reform will get underway that will lead to a new and expanded social compromise for the republic.

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The old social compromise, the “Rhineland” model, was that of a social market economy combining the dynamism of the market with solidarity-based protection against its risks. Such thinking is part of the DNA of Christian democracy as seen in the Christian socialist influences found in the party’s early programmes. Today, the task is to broaden the foundation in the direction of a socio-ecological market economy. Ultimately, the ecological question must be addressed alongside the social question, and treated as fundamental for the republic, and the dynamism of markets must be aligned with both social and ecological requirements.

A socio-ecological market economy could become the new consensus and the politico-institutional orientation of the Berlin Republic, which still lingers. If the Berlin Republic wants to come to terms with itself, it should develop a socio-ecological market economy as its guiding principle for the 21st century. A timely and highly urgent alternative to a

declining market radicalism, the socio-ecological market economy is also a programme for the future of liberal democracy.

Chancellorship in the 2020s

Even Armin Laschet, the candidate viewed as the current favourite to become chancellor, should recognise that such a refoundation is the great task of German chancellorship in the 2020s. The main competitor, Markus Söder, had recognised the prize and was very obviously reaching out for it. It is surprising how half-hearted Laschet's attempts have proved so far. The Rhenish Christian Democrats were always very aware of how much they had shaped Bonn's Rhenish Republic. But they have barely begun to understand that what is at stake today is the far-reaching rewriting of a Berlin Republic.

Without being an economist himself, Laschet is strongly influenced by the old industrial roots of his home region of North Rhine-Westphalia where, until recently, energy giants dreamed simply of stalling the energy transition. With Laschet's assistance, a 40-billion-euro coal phase-out by 2038 was agreed. In effect, it amounts to extending the damaging and increasingly unprofitable use of coal. With his patronage-oriented coal policy, Laschet shows that he has not yet recognised what is expected of Angela Merkel's successor.

Laschet also plays ecology off against social issues while opposing many proposals that approach the ecological and social questions in a sustainable way. He does not advocate an increase in the minimum wage, which could mitigate possible additional burdens from climate policy for people on lower incomes. He does not want deeper cuts in climate-damaging subsidies, and he is also stonewalling on a citizens' energy subsidy to compensate for higher carbon prices, as proposed by the Greens.

Instead, Laschet is planning a feel-good election campaign. After the pandemic has subsided, German citizens are to be bothered as little as possible with politics and campaigns: Everything will be fine! No green scaremongering! Knight Armin will drive away all worries, just like Mother Merkel did in the old days. It is not clear whether this strategy will work. Smiling away the great need for change might not cut it. Faced with a young and impatient generation, this tried-and-tested Christian Democrat strategy could go very wrong. July's disastrous floods, in which Laschet's home region was particularly affected, demonstrate that the issues of climate and flood protection cannot simply be pushed into the background. Moreover, video footage of a candidate laughing heartily while visiting the disaster region has lost him many sympathies.

However, Laschet is not a dogged fighter for the old. It is therefore not inconceivable that he will also come to terms with a black-green coalition in the federal government. On the other hand, even if the Greens do not succeed this time in gaining the chancellorship, such a constellation could nevertheless pave the way for a Green-led government in the medium term, as was the case with the emerging SPD. Social Democrats governed in the Federal Republic's first grand coalition as junior partners to the CDU/CSU from as early as 1966, before Willy Brandt took over the chancellorship for them in 1969. At that time, the junior partner role benefited the SPD as much as it harms it today.

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possible, a decade in which it finally comes into its own as a socio-ecological market society.

Mature pluralism

A positive aspect of Germany's pluralistic situation is that the representatives of the front-running parties are dealing with the situation relatively pragmatically. People have become accustomed to coalitions as have the politicians involved. For the time being, the increasing pluralism of culture and politics in the Federal Republic has not been leading to kind of tribalisation seen in the United States under Trump.

Germany will have a new chancellor after the election and probably also a new combination of parties in government. The chances are strong that it will be a stable government that will not plunge the country into any adventures but instead will tackle issues of ecology and sustainability more decisively than before. A new phase of the Berlin Republic seems possible, a decade in which it finally comes into its own as a socio-ecological market society that takes on the major issues of globalisation and digitalisation. If this turns out to be the case, and Germany acts as a player firmly anchored in Europe that faces up to geopolitical challenges, this is far from the worst signal the country could send.



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