

What Will Germany's Elections Mean for the EU?

Article by Sophie Pornschlegel

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Federal elections will take place in Germany on September 26, 2021. After 16 years at the helm of Europe's biggest member state, Angela Merkel will be a tough act to follow. Sophie Pornschlegel reflects on what we can expect from the next German government. Will the new leadership make European integration a priority and breathe new life into the EU policy process? And how might the Greens be able to influence this course?

Germany's upcoming federal election heralds the end of the "Merkel era" in EU policy. While the outgoing Chancellor has been recognised as an efficient crisis manager over the last decade, she has also been criticised for her lack of ambition at the European level – notably in the areas of climate change, eurozone reform, and foreign policy. Her successor will have a difficult job filling her shoes, as no one will be able to quickly replace the knowledge, relationships, and experience that she has built up over the years. However, the election could also usher in a fresh approach to German leadership. A more strategic German EU policy – instead of the pragmatic but slightly short-sighted crisis management of the past years – would be sorely needed to bridge the growing divides between European countries.

In this context, the German Greens could play an important role – they have set out an ambitious EU agenda which they would bring to the table in prospective coalition negotiations, ranging from climate change policies and the digital transformation to foreign policy. This will not be an easy task, as they are likely to clash with the Conservatives' positions and might lose the confidence of their voters if they compromise too much.

After 16 years in opposition, the Green party is keen to govern. With co-leaders Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, the Greens have moved towards the centre and become a much more established party than they were before, overcoming the internal divide between the more idealistic left wing of the party ("Fundis") and the more pragmatist centrists ("Realos"). Certain divides still linger on, however the leadership has been relatively successful in uniting the different factions ahead of the federal election. The Greens have shown their ability to govern in various different forms of coalitions at local and regional level – with Conservatives (CDU/CSU), Liberals (FDP), and Social Democrats (SPD). For instance, the Green Minister-President of the wealthy southern federal state of Baden-Württemberg, Winfried Kretschmann, has governed in a coalition with the conservative CDU since 2016 – which has also led to widespread criticism that he is too close to the automotive industry and promoting more conservative values than Green ideas. With a willingness to compromise in order to govern effectively, the current Greens were perceived as "good pupils" during the last coalition negotiations in 2017. This "test-run" in 2017 means that the Greens are well prepared for potential coalition negotiations in

the autumn. Nevertheless, the Greens will face a difficult balancing act between an effective government with coalition partners that do not necessarily share their views and remaining faithful to their ideas and voters.

Campaigning turns personal rather than policy-focused

The current campaign could make the path to government a bumpy one for the Greens. The Green candidate for chancellor Annalena Baerbock has been the object of vile personal attacks that aim to undermine her legitimacy. Both the candidate and her party have also been criticised for their response – which seem to indicate that the Greens were not fully prepared for a campaign in which the role of political figures is so central, but rather anticipated a discussion more focused on the issues. This has affected the polls, as the Greens declined from 25 to 19 per cent in the space of a few weeks. However, the devastating floods in Western Germany in July 2021 have turned the clock back for the Greens in terms of boosting their popularity, not so much because they occupied a prominent place in the debate but rather thanks to the missteps of other parties. Perhaps most significant among these was the video which emerged of the Conservative candidate Armin Laschet laughing during a visit to a town badly affected by the floods. In this election campaign, parties seem to be more successful when their candidates remain silent, while others are made the targets of negative campaigning.

Boosting their [The Greens] popularity, not so much because they occupied a prominent place in the debate but rather thanks to the missteps of other parties

An absence of the Greens in Germany's next government would be detrimental for Germany and the EU, as the party has recognised the country's need for a more pro-active leadership with a modernising agenda. The challenges ahead are not only urgent, but significant in their size and importance: whether it is tackling climate change, reducing inequalities, or moving forward on the digital transformation, there is plenty of work to do. The "hidden" side of Germany contrasts sharply with the image of a high-tech, wealthy country: the connectivity of rural areas is appalling; the low-wage sector is pushing more people into the "working poor"; and the energy transition has stalled, as Germany's reliance on coal and nuclear energy remains significant.

At the same time, there has been minimal interest in the EU during this campaign. Even if most parties have adopted a generally pro-European stance, the EU has been missing in the debates – despite its crucial role in the Covid-19 crisis and the growing discussions within Germany on repeated violations of EU values. The lack of debate is worrying, as Germany plays a particularly important role in the EU and should throw its weight behind the European Commission to achieve the success of the EU's "twin transition" (climate and digital transformation) before the next European election in 2024. Even for the Greens, the EU seems to have been relegated to a second-order topic in the campaign.

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The Green vision of Europe: A progressive agenda for EU policy

Despite the lack of focus on the EU, the Greens still showcase an ambitious plan for the EU. A different approach towards German European policy would be a welcome move after Merkel's lack of strategic vision. They propose moving away from austerity and supporting the EU's Next Generation recovery package in order to respond to the socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, investing much more in the ecological and digital transformation, and placing human rights and the rule of law at the centre of European cooperation. With the Greens in government, there would be a more strategic agenda on EU affairs – although this will ultimately depend on the trade-offs made during the coalition negotiations with the Conservatives, Liberals, and other parties.

Potential negotiations with the Conservatives could prove difficult on a range of EU issues, most prominently on the rule of law and economic policy, but also on other issues such as energy and migration policy. For instance, the tacit approval of Viktor Orbán's government displayed by the CDU/CSU at the European level by keeping Fidesz in the European People's Party until March 2021 – despite public pressure to suspend and expel the party – is fundamentally opposed to the Green's approach towards EU values. While the current leadership of the Greens is known to seek consensus to find pragmatic solutions, this issue is likely to be a sticking point – compromising on democracy is not in the Greens' DNA.

*They [The Greens] propose moving away from
austerity and supporting the EU's Next
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socio-economic consequences of Covid-19*

Another difficult discussion will be on EU solidarity and Eurozone reform: Conservatives have defended a “frugal” position in recent years, compromising only slightly to ensure that the Covid-19 recovery package would see the light of the day. However, the Conservatives have not fundamentally changed their position; they still believe that it is up to individual member states to take responsibility for their own public finances. For instance, their manifesto suggests reinforcing the fiscal rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), as well as completing the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), whereas the Greens would like to reform the SGP and develop the ESM into a “European Monetary Fund”. This fiscally conservative position clashes with the Greens' more solidarity-based and Keynesian approach. Similarly, the Greens' wishes to increase climate investments in the framework of the Covid-19 recovery will clash with the Conservative's priority on competitiveness.

The Greens and the Conservatives will also struggle to find a consensus on migration policy. The Greens' humanitarian position is at odds with the harsher anti-immigration

stance of the Conservatives, who defend more deportations of “illegal” immigrants – in keeping with the hard line followed by many other European countries on immigration. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has relaunched the debate about migration and whether Germany should welcome refugees “as it did in 2015”, but debates have so far lacked a European perspective.

Luckily, one difficult point of contention has been removed: thanks to the German-US deal on Nord Stream 2 in July, the negotiations between the Greens and the Social Democrats or Conservatives will be easier. While the Greens were strongly against the gas pipeline as it would increase Germany’s reliance on Russian gas, the Conservatives and the Social Democrats defended the project.

How Greens should approach the coalition negotiations

Until the election results are known, every scenario is still possible. It could well be that the Conservatives govern in coalition only with the Liberals. We could see the first Conservative-Green government emerge or a “Jamaica” coalition of the Conservatives, Liberals, and Greens. A “traffic light” coalition with Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals is also on the cards. A left-wing coalition including the Greens, Social Democrats, and the Left (Die Linke) might be more difficult – the Social Democrats may wish to stay in opposition depending on their results, while the Die Linke is torn by internal fights and are doing badly in the polls. As it is very likely that the Greens will form part of the coalition negotiations, they should keep in mind the following points:

Do not forget about the EU in the coalition treaty. Europe featured in the first chapter in the last coalition treaty in 2017, entitled “A renewal for Europe”. However, those four pages included little of substance and many contradictions. In addition, the EU was absent from other parts of the coalition treaty. This led to an unambitious German EU policy over the past four years, which proposed close to no new initiatives. This mistake should not be repeated: the Greens should prioritise the EU in the coalition treaty.

Remember that EU policy is a cross-sectoral topic. The Green election manifesto suggests they have understood that EU policy has become an integral part of domestic policy, mentioning legislative packages and Commission initiatives throughout policy fields. Nevertheless, there is always a risk to focusing solely on the national level in coalition negotiations. Therefore, the Greens should make sure they include the European dimension not only in the EU or foreign policy chapter, but also in other policy fields in which EU competences are already important, as well as in fields in which competences are likely to be developed, such as health.

Reflect on Germany’s position of power in Europe. While the Greens have been vocal about violations of EU values, they have not yet addressed the question of how Germany intends to overcome the divides within the EU. They should also reflect on how Germany intends to use its power to improve the EU’s resilience and capacity to act, especially in view of the global competition between the US and China on key issues such as tech, climate, or trade. To be more honest about one’s own position within Europe – looking at both the positive and negative – and to reflect on the kind of role Germany would like to play in the future should be part of the Green’s reflection before potentially entering the next German government.

Invest in the Franco-German relation - quickly. The French Presidential elections coming up in 2022 leaves little time to move forward at the EU level. The quicker the negotiations, the better the German government could support the French Council Presidency, which takes place in the first half of 2022. The Greens should invest more time in building alliances with Germany's historic partner if they wish to move forward on their EU agenda – and they should develop a strategy in case Marine le Pen is elected president.

The Greens are likely to enter coalition negotiations after the election at the end of September, even if all the cards are still on the table as to which parties will be part of the next German government. Whatever the outcome of the election, the Greens should ensure that their pro-European stance is much more strongly reflected in their campaign and the coalition negotiations.



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