



Germany's Election and Its Potential Implications

This past Sunday, elections were held in Germany to elect the 630 members of the Bundestag, the country's federal parliament. The snap election was triggered when German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition government collapsed in November of last year. The results saw Germany's center-right conservative bloc of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its partner, the Christian Social Union (CSU), finish in first with around 28.5% of the vote, while the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) surged to come in second with 20.8%. The AfD secured its strongest-ever result in a national election, finishing more than 4 percentage points ahead of Outgoing German Chancellor Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD) – which came in third with only 16.4% of the total vote, an almost 10-point drop from their first-place finish back in 2021 and its worst-ever federal election result. The outcome means that the conservative CDU/CSU is on track to lead the next coalition government and that CDU party leader Friedrich Merz is likely to be Germany's next chancellor. However, while they did secure the most votes – giving them a projected 208 seats in the Bundestag – the CDU/CSU alliance alone falls short of the 316 seats needed to form a government on its own and will therefore be required to build a coalition in order to do so. Despite the AfD's record-high second place vote share, parties and blocs have appeared to rule out forming a coalition with the far-right party.

The recent election in Germany marked the first post-World War II election in the country in which a party other than either the CDU/CSU or the SPD came in second place. Additionally, the AfD's electoral showing is the strongest by a German far-right movement in the same time frame. Analysts have highlighted that the party's rise can be largely attributed to its growing appeal among voters who are critical of immigration and multilateralism – resulting in an evident “shift to the right” political trend that has been seen recently across the continent in other countries like France, Italy, Hungary, and Austria. The AfD is unlikely to be involved in any coalition government, but the election results are expected to strengthen its clout in the Bundestag and the level of impact it possesses in influencing policymaking. The AfD has been credibly accused of extremism and are therefore being surveilled by German authorities, which has largely contributed to their ostracism from the official German political arena. It is important to note that while gains were clearly made on the far-right end of the political spectrum, there were also significant ones on the other side too as the German Left Party nearly doubled its vote share from the previous election. In totality, the results suggest that more of the country's electorate is drifting towards the political fringes, as dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties increases. Thus, centrist parties will have to swiftly work to address the country's challenges or risk potentially even larger electoral drop-offs in future elections. Some experts speculate that the center-right CDU/CSU alliance and the center-left SPD seem likely to be compelled to cooperate in what would amount to a fragile coalition government in order to keep the political periphery forces at bay. To date, Merz has set a target of mid-April for attempting to establish a new German coalition government.

The makeup of the new coalition government stemming from the recent election results is poised to have a major effect on the foreign policy stances that it adopts. Regarding its potential impact on relations between Germany and the United States, Merz has expressed that “My absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve [security] independence from the United States” under Trump. According to Merz, the Trump administration “does not care about Europe and is aligning with Russia,” and the

anticipated soon-to-be chancellor even likened the recent U.S. tactics under Trump to those of the Kremlin itself. He has also conveyed doubt over what the current American government's position on the Ukraine War and vis-à-vis Europe will be in the coming weeks and months, and as such, has surmised that Europe may need to devise a new defense structure to possibly replace the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). All of this comes amid a backdrop of serious uncertainty regarding the future of Ukraine and Trump's commitment to European security, concerns that Washington under Trump is moving closer to Moscow, and doubts related to the status of Europe's alliance with the United States.

As it pertains to German policy towards the Middle East and immigration from there in particular, the electoral triumph of conservatives and surges by the far-right in the recent election cast uncertainty over the future of refugees and asylum seekers. Merz has prompted his party to adopt a tougher stance on border security and migrants, and has pledged to tighten immigration laws. He contends that his prospective centrist coalition must initiate its own stricter measures in order to fend off the rising political relevancy of the far-right. Others disagree with the idea of instituting harsher immigration policies and argue that sealing off borders will not make Germany safer. As one re-elected Bundestag member put it, "What we truly need is the opposite: safe pathways, humane and fair treatment for those who arrive, and full access to work, healthcare, and social services. We need to empower those seeking refuge in Germany rather than to exclude them." On another element related to the Middle East, Merz has also been criticized by human rights advocates for recently expressing an interest in "finding a way" for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to visit Germany, despite the latter's arrest warrant at the hands of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Ultimately, when it comes to the issue of immigration, the new German coalition government could find itself facing legal or political barriers if it seeks to implement stricter policies, and it remains to be seen how this would play out.