

## SNAPSHOT

# German parliamentary elections – Merkel's choice

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### INTRODUCTION

Seldom have parliamentary elections in an EU member state attracted such levels of attention and interest from its European partners and neighbours as those that took place yesterday in Germany.

For many in Europe, it was clear from the outset that Angela Merkel would continue to head up the German government. But what conclusions would be drawn from the results for her Christian Democrats and potential partners? Will a new alliance pursue different policies?

This snapshot tries to find the answers.

### PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

That Angela Merkel remains Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany will not come as a surprise to anyone in Germany or Europe. That she just missed out on an absolute majority for her Christian Democrats, however, may well have surprised the Chancellor herself. The victory for the CDU is without doubt her personal achievement. Ridiculed for years as a political mishap, a historical gaffe following reunification, the East German Protestant has engaged with the heart of German society. She has modernised the CDU without entering into detailed discussions. She was the first to recognise that practicality and competency count for more today than ideology and polarisation, and she has used her own analytical power and nerve to guide Germany through the crisis. And what's more, Angela Merkel keeps her feet on the ground when others had long since become airborne. Even now, she can be found doing her weekly shop in the supermarket round the corner. Aware of the influence she exerts, she nevertheless remains incapable of succumbing to the trappings of power. She scored a victory yesterday, but she did not crow about it. This is why the Germans like her, and they have given her their trust.

But Ms Merkel also knows that she has now reached the zenith of her power. There is nothing left to conquer; from now on, the aim is to safeguard and consolidate. The first task is to seek out a new majority, after her previous partners, the liberal FDP, were ejected from the

Bundestag for the first time in more than 60 years. The Liberals' parliamentary demise indicates that, for now, no one civic camp can lay claim to their own majority – the union parties must look to the left to find a partner. From a purely mathematical perspective, the Chancellor could establish a stable majority with any of the parties remaining in government: the Social Democrats, the Greens, or the Left Party, the heirs to the former East German unity party. In actuality, the focus will be on the Greens or the Social Democrats, and the Greens hold the better cards from a strategic standpoint: No longer able to make great demands, they will force the CDU to make fewer concessions; they would be more acceptable to the strengthened Christian Social Union from Bavaria, and they would open the door to the left-wing camp for the CDU and CSU. Were it to come to this, Ms Merkel would be the first Chancellor in history to have a different partner by her side in each legislative period.

However, a black/green alliance would be a federal-level experiment from which many in the CDU would instinctively recoil. Most would probably prefer to repeat the Grand Coalition of 2005 to 2009 with the Social Democrats, a return to the familiar that would certainly meet with the approval of voters. But seeing the Grand Coalition as the easier solution for the CDU could prove deceptive. The Social Democrats could form a theoretical majority with the Greens and the Left Party right now, and it remains unclear whether this would slot into an alliance under Angela Merkel and remain stable for four years.

Without doubt, the strategic task facing the SPD over the coming years will be to find a way of existing in an alliance with the Left: These elections have shown that the SPD will not be able to elevate any of its ranks to Chancellor without the Left Party, the red/green project having managed to secure the vote of just one third of the electorate. So it is no wonder that the social democratic basis is wary of a reissue of the Grand Coalition, in which Peer Steinbrück – as he once again made clear yesterday – would play no role.

Whatever the outcome of the consultations and subsequent coalition negotiations, Germany will remain stable from a European perspective. It is unlikely that

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Ms Merkel will make any further concessions towards the crisis-ridden countries of the European Union. The near-success of the "Alternative for Germany", the only party in the line-up that vocalised its opposition to the single currency, taught her just how generous the Germans are prepared to be. She will want to keep firm hold of the reins in the sovereign debt crisis, and both the Greens and Social Democrats have always supported her approach in this regard, even when in opposition.

Ms Merkel's new cabinet team is still unclear, and is traditionally only revealed once the coalition negotiations have come to an end. What we do know, however, is that at least those posts filled by the outgoing FDP ministers will need to be restaffed, including the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Economic Affairs. The CDU's Minister for Family Affairs also leaves a vacant post. Speculation is already rife that Ursula von der Leyen, the bustling Minister for Labour and Social Affairs, could succeed Guido Westerwelle in the Foreign Office. In one last piece of speculation, all roads seem to lead to Wolfgang Schäuble, the CDU's veteran in the Ministry of Finance. He was the CDU's top candidate in Baden-Württemberg, and his clear victory laid the foundations for its success in the Federal Government.

Details and staffing choices will not be announced for some weeks yet. Even the parties' leading committees need to get used to a situation completely different to that predicted by pollsters.

And then begin the consultations, which will eventually lead to coalition negotiations. At least four weeks are likely to go by before a new Federal Government emerges.

And whether she chooses the Greens or the Social Democrats as her partner, the new alliance under Angela Merkel will probably be shakier on its feet than some are currently anticipating.

The elections proved disastrous for the FDP. Following a historical success of almost 15 per cent in 2009, the Liberals have crashed and burned. Only a period of non-parliamentary opposition will allow it to regroup, the leadership will certainly be replaced in its entirety, and Christian Lindner, the young party leader in North Rhine-Westphalia (the most heavily populated state), will have to bear the responsibility.

His opportunity? Much more than five per cent of the German electorate would potentially vote for a liberal party if they can stand out and maintain their position with poise and conviction. The FDP have a long way to go.



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