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Germany's Federal Election of 2021: Multi-Crisis Politics and the Consolidation of the Six-Party System

JÖRG MICHAEL DOSTAL

Abstract

The German federal election of 2021 reshuffled Germany's party-political hierarchy, but left the six-party system intact. For the first time since 2002, the SPD narrowly overtook the CDU/CSU to become the party with the largest vote share. The Greens and the FDP also gained votes while the CDU/CSU and the Left party suffered high losses and the AfD minor losses. Crucially, party system continuity coexists with severe challenges for German policy makers, namely regional and global insecurity, decline in the country's infrastructure and social coherence, as well as the highly divisive management of the Covid crisis. While the electorate still focusses mostly on social protection and economic security, it is unclear whether Germany's political class can deliver on such expectations in a multi-crisis context. Crucially, technocratic updating at the expense of liberal democracy and constitutional order will worsen rather than improve the current situation.

Keywords: Annalena Baerbock, Armin Laschet, coronavirus crisis, Germany, German party system, Olaf Scholz

Introduction

THE GLOBAL coronavirus crisis affecting Germany since February 2020 has acted as a catalyst to end the 'muddling through' policies of the Merkel era. While Merkel was throughout her long tenure as chancellor (2005–2021) associated with a reactive style of policy making, notable for pragmatic adjustment to global and national pressures and an effort to occupy the political centre ground, she also engaged in sudden shifts in direction, such as her decision after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan to commit Germany to a demanding agenda of 'energy transition' away from nuclear power. Another key moment was her decision to open Germany's borders for refugees and migrants in the fall of 2015, which ended the efforts of the European Union (EU) to maintain common policies on migration. Finally, her management of the coronavirus crisis broke with conventions of liberal democracy and has been highly authoritarian. Thus, Merkel's political legacy lies in its very ambiguity, namely that she reframed existing problems, managed

acute crisis with monetary and fiscal palliatives and ignored the structural decline in Germany's public infrastructure.

This neglect also concerned her party, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), which under Merkel ceased to unify different political currents into a 'broad church'. In particular, the representatives of the conservative wing were either lost to the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or simply to demoralisation. The CDU party management became single-mindedly focussed on chasing an imaginary political 'centre' at a time when German society was increasingly lacking in overarching common characteristics. Until the 1990s, the centre had been characterised by concepts of petit bourgeois respectability, fitting in with the CDU idea of unifying the people across social class lines. More recently, however, the centre has dissolved into contradictory milieus and attitudes. In particular, the mostly Green-voting faction of the new middle class has little in common with those who once made up the Christian Democratic electoral coalition, namely the self-employed, white collar

employees and better-off pensioners. Over the last two electoral cycles of Merkel's chancellorship, CDU electoral support collapsed. The party no longer offered programmatic orientations, while voters were also no longer ideologically committed. The outcome of the 2021 elections, namely the narrow defeat of the CDU chancellor candidate, Armin Laschet, by his Social Democratic Party (SPD) challenger, Olaf Scholz, underlined that Merkel had failed to facilitate a transition in the chancellorship toward a successor originating from her own party.¹

Before analysing the 2021 election, however, one must first look back at the outcome of the previous 2017 poll and locate Germany's current political problems in the larger context. In fact, Merkel's outgoing grand coalition government of CDU/CSU and SPD was merely an alliance of convenience, owing to the absence of any clear-cut alternative government majority in Germany's post-2017 six-party system (the rightist AfD had joined the Liberals (FDP), Left party and Greens as the strongest opposition party in 2017). The grand coalition government had entered office in an unprecedented delayed fashion in March 2018, a full six months after the 2017 polls, owing to two prolonged rounds of negotiations to assemble a new government. Initially, the CDU/CSU had pursued the formation of a three party government with the FDP and the Greens, the so-called 'Jamaica coalition' (named after the respective party colours that are included in the Jamaican national flag). However, this first round of negotiations collapsed when the FDP leader, Christian Lindner, announced that it was 'better not to govern than to govern badly'. Following the failure of the Jamaica option, the CDU/CSU then turned to the SPD as the only other available partner to form a majority government. The 'grand coalition' government therefore had less than two years to implement any policies before the coronavirus crisis closed down much of the political, economic and social life in Germany.

¹S. Wohanka, 'Armin Laschet hat die Wahl verloren—er allein?', *Das Blättchen*, vol. 24, no. 22, 25 October 2021; <https://das-blaettchen.de/2021/10/armin-laschet-hat-die-wahl-verloren-%e2%80%93-er-allein-59085.html> (accessed 1 November 2021).

Germany's structural problems

There was already a broadly shared view pre-Covid that Germany's political class had become unable to get things done and that state structures and public administration suffered from bureaucratic sclerosis. One way to approach this multifaceted subject is to stress what had been most prominent in Germany's public discourse in recent years, namely the shift in the country's geopolitical environment. On one hand, German public disenchantment with the former patron state USA became entrenched. In parallel, many Germans started to look at the rise of China and of East Asian models of state capitalism with a combination of admiration and fear. Compared with the more dynamic East Asian challengers, the European social model—to the extent that it exists—and Germany in particular, appear to have fallen behind rapidly. In Germany, the public and private sectors are equally mediocre, in the sense that they lack sufficient innovative ability. This weakness is symbolised in the long-standing failure of the country to develop a strong IT-based e-governance and e-commerce infrastructure. In fact, Germany's public sector entered long-term decline as a result of endless rounds of cost-cutting and incremental privatisation. Meanwhile, the private sector still mainly focusses on established product lines in sectors such as chemistry and engineering, or sunset industries such as car manufacturing. This suggests that new global growth sectors will not see many German-based entries.

Concurrently, the promised German turn toward 'green' growth sectors since Merkel's 2011 post-Fukushima call for 'energy transition' has become associated with steadily rising energy prices for consumers and less than convincing efforts in fields such as e-mobility, which have not resulted in fully-engineered product lines. While Germany's alternative energy production sector (solar and wind power) has grown, this has come at the expense of high public subsidies, while comparative Chinese efforts enjoy larger economies of scale and are more successful in export markets.

Looking further at the public sector, its old-fashioned style of working coexists with a tendency to burden-shift inconvenient tasks whenever possible. One core feature of the problem is that the structures of German federalism are somewhat dysfunctional: many policies that

would require joined-up government and cooperative procedures are simply dismissed as too demanding. Even a massive expansion of public funding for tasks that can no longer be ignored—such as the digitalisation of the health and education sectors—does not address the implementation gap because the public sector lacks the necessary specialist knowledge to set an agenda. Moreover, efforts at improving Germany's IT infrastructure would further increase the structural dependency on US or other foreign tech corporations owing to the absence of a national industrial base. Since 2017, German federal government ministries have spent more than €1 billion on private sector advice, with the ministries of interior, transportation, and finance being most dependent on such services.² This lack of capability is replicated across the federal political system, following many years of under-investment in public services and personnel development.

Focussing on Germany's public infrastructure is equally sobering: the fact that the construction of Berlin's new airport took nine years longer than expected and was at least five times more expensive than initially budgeted stands as a symbol for the entire country. Public sector projects face endless delays, while decision makers are not held accountable for their failures. Across the board, Germany's digital and non-digital infrastructure is mediocre in the EU context and compares very unfavourably with its East Asian competitors. In the education sector, German public investments as a share of GDP are in the lower third of OECD countries and below the average of a set of twenty-two EU countries providing data. The only exception was Germany's public spending on higher education, which was close to the average of these twenty-two EU countries.³ Other fields of public infrastructure have fared even worse during the Merkel era. Germany's public railway system has been steadily downscaled, resulting in

the decline in coverage of rural areas. Moreover, the condition of the network and punctuality of trains is steadily deteriorating, while the annual deficit is rapidly growing.⁴

As for publicly supported social housing construction offering rent-controlled accommodation to socially disadvantaged citizens, the stock of such housing fell by nearly 50 per cent during the Merkel years, from around 2.1 million flats in 2006 to around 1.1 million flats in 2019.⁵ This decline occurred during a period when the Merkel government's decision to allow the large-scale entry of migrants and refugees into Germany significantly pushed up demand for social housing. The under-funded public policy effort toward social integration of newcomers produced negative feedback among the native population. One major opinion poll commissioned by the Protestant Church, a body unlikely to be accused of nativist or anti-refugee attitudes, suggested that around half of the people polled demanded that no more refugees should be allowed into Germany under any circumstances (another 15 per cent suggested that they were 'rather opposed'). The same poll stated that only 12 per cent considered the integration of migrants over the last decade as to some extent successful, while 58 per cent considered it unsuccessful (27 per cent were undecided).⁶

Germany's recent migration policies remain trapped in an expectation gap: large sections of the political class hope that cohorts of young migrants will produce a more balanced demographic profile that will help stabilise Germany's 'pay-as-you-go' pension system

⁴W. Wolf, 'Die existenzielle Krise des Bahnkonzerns', in Bündnis Bahn für Alle, eds., *Deutsche Bahn Alternativer Bericht 2020/21*, Berlin, Bündnis Bahn für Alle, 2021, pp. 3–21.

⁵'Bestand der Sozialmietwohnungen in Deutschland in den Jahren von 2005 bis 2019', *Statista*, August 2020; <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/892789/umfrage/sozialwohnungen-in-deutschland/> (accessed 1 November 2021).

⁶'Diakonie zieht Bilanz zur Flüchtlingspolitik: Integration und Sozialpolitik gemeinsam denken—Entweder-oder Logik führt in die Sackgasse', *Diakonie Deutschland*, 17 June 2021; <https://www.diakonie.de/pressemeldungen/diakonie-zieht-bilanz-zur-fluechtlingspolitik-integration-und-sozialpolitik-zusammen-denken-entweder-oder-logik-fuehrt-in-die-sackgasse> (accessed 1 November 2021).

²F. Busch, 'Eine Milliarde Euro für externe Berater: Bundesregierung in der Kritik', *web.de*, 23 September 2021; <https://web.de/magazine/politik/milliarde-euro-externe-berater-bundesregierung-kritik-36198>

³Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance 2021*, Paris, OECD, 2021, pp. 247–8, 268. Spending data references from 2018.

and improve future economic prospects. Yet, such attitudes ignore that the capacity of German society to integrate newcomers is in doubt owing to a decline in social and economic coherence. Starting with the welfare retrenchments during the second Gerhard Schröder chancellorship (2002–2005), Germany's labour market has experienced increasing fragmentation. The so-called 'standard work relationship' (*Normalarbeitsverhältnis*), based on full-time work in regulated sectors with trade union representation and collective wage agreements, has become much less common, declining steadily from around 70 per cent in 2000 to around 50 per cent at present.⁷ This deregulation of the German labour market at the beginning of the twenty-first century has pushed up the share of part-time, fixed-term and agency work, resulting in the expansion of economic sectors in which labour relations no longer differ from those prevalent in Anglo-Saxon capitalism. Germany's cities and the country's education system are increasingly segregated along ethnic and social class lines. Taken together, these developments essentially explain the aggressive and pessimistic tendency in the country's recent political discourse.

Germany's acute problems

Since March 2020, the Covid crisis has challenged Germany's statehood and mode of governance. During the 2021 election campaign, two further unexpected disasters struck. Domestically, torrential rainfall in parts of Germany and western Europe resulted in flooding catastrophes in the regions of North Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland Palatine. These events in mid-July 2021 destroyed entire villages and the livelihood of a large number of citizens, while 183 people died in the floods. Soon afterwards, the collapse of the Western military presence in Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power demonstrated

that Germany's two decades of military engagement in the Hindu Kush had essentially been in vain.

Regardless, the coronavirus crisis continues to represent the most significant transformative event in German politics. Initially, the virus was perceived as an extreme danger for public health. However, practical experience subsequently demonstrated that Covid infections are most dangerous for the elderly, people with pre-existing severe health conditions and those in care homes and crowded types of accommodation. Yet, Germany experienced no general excess mortality during 2020 when accounting for overall societal aging. Moreover, the number of people in intensive care in Germany has been fairly low even during the winter peak. The diagnostic utility of positive PCR-Covid tests in the absence of clinical illness and the question whether people died 'from' or 'with' Covid in the context of pre-existing 'co-mortality' conditions remains highly contested. In this context, government critics stressed that the Merkel government focussed almost exclusively on a single data point, namely the 'seven-day incidence' of positive PCR tests. The same critics urgently demanded representative cohort studies be carried out in order to establish the actual virus prevalence in the country in line with standard statistical methods.⁸ This request has been met with ongoing refusal by Germany's core executive.

In fact, it was exactly the ambiguous medical situation that created new openings for the executive to concentrate power at the top of the political pyramid. In an unprecedented move, Chancellor Merkel side-lined Germany's bicameral federal legislature and centralised coronavirus-related decision making in a narrow circle consisting of her and the sixteen prime ministers of Germany's regions. The new *ad hoc* body bypassed Germany's constitution (the Basic Law) and was facilitated by an act of emergency legislation, the 'Infection Protection Law', which

⁷M. Lübker and T. Schulten, *Tarifbindung in den Bundesländern: Entwicklungslinien und Auswirkungen auf die Beschäftigten*, 3rd edn., Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, March 2021, p. 6; https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_ta_elemente_89_2021.pdf (accessed 1 November 2021).

⁸M. Schrappe, et al., *Thesenpapier 8: Die Pandemie durch SARS-CoV-2/CoVid-19: Pandemie als komplexes System*, 29 August 2021; https://www.schrappe.com/ms2/index_html_files/Thesenpapier8_endfass.pdf (accessed 1 November 2021). The critique of the Merkel government's use of statistics during the pandemic can be found on pp. 52–67.

allowed many basic civil liberties stated in the constitution to be overridden. In parallel, scientific advisory work on Covid issues was centralised almost exclusively in a single government-financed health surveillance body (two other scientific bodies that later gained some significance were also government financed).

Very early on, in April 2020, Chancellor Merkel stressed that the ‘pandemic will not disappear until we have a vaccine’ while adding in February 2021 that ‘the pandemic is only defeated when all people in the world are vaccinated’.⁹ By projecting the ‘ultimate’ goal of the emergency measures into the future, Merkel’s timeframe quickly became open-ended. Although she initially announced in March 2020 that civil liberties would only be suspended for a brief period of time, this promise subsequently fell by the wayside. The so-called ‘pandemic condition of national scope’ that was declared on 28 March 2020 to introduce coronavirus emergency measures was subsequently extended four times in the federal parliament, although with a steadily declining share of support on each occasion. The four opposition parties, the AfD, Liberals, Left party and Greens generally voted against the measures. They were later joined by a group of dissenters from Merkel’s CDU, mostly from the former East Germany, who suggested that the pandemic situation had passed and that government activities were now disproportionate to the threat level.¹⁰

From a comparative perspective, the degree of resistance against the emergency policies in Germany has been much lower than was the case in countries such as Britain, France or Italy. There are two main explanations for this.

⁹‘Merkel zur Corona-Lage: Pandemie wird nicht verschwinden, bis wir wirklich einen Impfstoff haben’, *welt.de*, 9 April 2020; Pressekonferenz von Kanzlerin Merkel nach der G-7 Videokonferenz’, *bundesregierung.de*, 19 February 2021; <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/buerokratieabbau/pressekonferenz-von-kanzlerin-merkel-nach-der-g7-videokonferenz-1860056> (accessed 1 November 2021).

¹⁰K. Montag, ‘Die Position der Parteien zur “epidemischen Lage nationaler Tragweite” und die Zukunft der Corona-Politik’, *multipolar-magazin.de*, 21 September 2021; <https://multipolar-magazin.de/artikel/positionen-der-parteien> (accessed 1 November 2021).

Firstly, the German emergency was at the outset limited in scope: all-out lockdowns were avoided, with the notable exception of Bavaria. For a long time, citizens were led to believe that the emergency regime would soon end, which facilitated compliance. Secondly, and more importantly, German policy makers were among the most ‘generous’ on a global scale in terms of public spending on economic relief measures. Such payments targeted employers by offering credit provision for enterprise and compensation for lost sales as a result of lockdown measures. As for employees, salaries of workers suffering from enterprise closures or undergoing coronavirus quarantine were also subsidised by compensation payments (*Kurzarbeitergeld*). In fact, such policies ignored the previous German policy paradigm of the ‘debt brake’ (*Schuldenbremse*) on public spending and appeared to amount to pandemic solidarity and even a break with previous neoliberal modes of governance.

However, the perceived generosity was deceptive. Overall, the payments were distributed in a lopsided manner and mostly according to corporate lobbying power favouring large corporations. Small and medium-sized enterprises received less compensation during the escalating business lockdowns between November 2020 and the first half of 2021. Throughout this time, online-based corporations rapidly grew their market share at the expense of brick and mortar retailers. Crucially, the self-employed in fields such as culture, education and entertainment became the main losers of the crisis. They received very limited or no compensation owing to their inability to provide Germany’s bureaucracy with documentation of lost earnings. They were also, therefore, most vocal in opposing the government’s lockdowns. Overall, Germany’s coronavirus policies lacked evidence-based decision making and included major misallocation of public funds in the absence of effective supervisory bodies.¹¹ Yet, since the ‘grand coalition’ government parties were both equally involved, with the SPD-led finance ministry of Olaf Scholz, together with the CDU-led health and economy ministries,

¹¹J. M. Dostal, ‘Germany’s corona crisis: the state of emergency and policy (mis)learning’, *Journal of the Korean-German Association for Social Sciences*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2021, pp. 29–75.

among the core actors, they silently agreed to keep the issue off the election agenda.

The two other significant and unexpected problems—the flooding disaster and Germany's retreat from Afghanistan—entered the election agenda without time for the political parties to develop a strategic response. Germany's flood catastrophe raised numerous questions, such as why housing construction had been allowed in areas that might be under threat of flooding and why the local authorities and regional state TV had not transmitted the urgent warnings that had been available in the hours before disaster struck. Shortly after, Chancellor Merkel and one regional prime minister, Malu Dreyer of the SPD, visited a locality hit by the flooding. On this occasion, Merkel extended an arm to help the physically handicapped Dreyer's mobility, and the resulting media pictures indicated that the topic would not be used for partisan purposes during the election campaign.

Finally, Germany's rapid retreat from Afghanistan added a foreign policy problem to the election agenda. The fact that Germany's entire foreign policy establishment, with the exception of the AfD, Left party and one individual Green MP, had failed to forecast the collapse of the Western-backed regime in Kabul, added to the feeling that those responsible had never understood the realities of twenty years of Western military intervention. Now pushed to evacuate their assets in the time window granted by the new Taliban-led Afghan authorities, the very same politicians simply suggested that mistakes would be discussed once the election was over. They also stated that raising German military expenditure in line with the NATO goal of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence was more urgent than before. Conversely, neither the AfD nor the Left party, whose earlier devastating evaluation of Germany's military mission in Afghanistan had been vindicated by the course of events, were able to capitalise electorally on the grand coalition's foreign policy disaster.

Election campaigning: candidates, parties and topics

Germany's federal election of 2021 differed substantially from past rounds of voting.

Because of ongoing coronavirus restrictions, it was initially unclear to what extent a traditional election campaign would take place at all. In the event, public authorities facilitated 'opening clauses' for campaign events, including allowing indoor party meetings without mask mandates. Apart from Covid-related challenges (there were no reports of a rise in infections because of campaigning), the declining influence of the traditional party machines, mostly associated with the Christian and Social Democratic parties, whose average membership age is now around sixty, and the parallel weakening of linkages between parties and the electorate, suggested that the election outcome was genuinely open. Earlier analogue styles of party activism, namely to call upon party members for canvassing and street rallies, could now to a large extent be replaced by (social) media efforts. The degree of change is difficult to quantify, however, since the reach of social media in Germany differs vastly according to age groups. Overall, the campaign style became more 'Americanised' in the sense that the media, notably state TV, focussed on personalities and framed political conflicts as '*triell*' between the three candidates for chancellor advanced by Christian and Social Democrats and the Green party, namely Armin Laschet (CDU, aged sixty), Olaf Scholz (SPD, aged sixty-three) and Annalena Baerbock (Greens, aged forty).

The briefest possible summary of the campaign events is that Laschet and Baerbock, who were both initially enjoying poll support in the high 20 per cent range, clashed and damaged each other. This allowed the initially lowest-ranking candidate, Scholz, to unexpectedly win from behind, although with a vote share that is still very low when judged against earlier SPD election results.

To begin with Laschet: he had been the prime minister of Germany's most populous state of North-Rhine Westphalia since 2017 and became CDU party leader in January 2020 when he defeated a more conservative leadership contender in an online poll of party functionaries. From the very beginning of his campaign, he was considered the candidate of the CDU party machine which had been decimated and weakened during the Merkel era. He was picked over the heads of the conservative wing of the CDU and of the CSU, the regional sister party of the CDU in Bavaria.

The CSU had favoured its own leader, the Bavarian prime minister, Markus Söder, as a candidate for chancellor by pointing out that he enjoyed a higher standing in opinion polls in comparison to Laschet. By selecting Laschet, the CDU ignored the wishes of its Bavarian sister party and post-election observers considered this choice as a major explanatory factor for the poor electoral showing.

Laschet is a centrist in the sense that he combines economic liberalism with bourgeois social values. However, he was not seen as a person representing a new start in German politics, but rather a representative of the exhausted ancient regime. It never became clear what he stood for politically. Initially, Laschet stressed the significant role of parliament during coronavirus crisis management and associated himself with one of Germany's less alarmist virologists, highlighting the need for society to co-exist with the virus. Yet, since opinion polls suggested that the population was increasingly willing to go along with authoritarian Covid measures in exchange for 'security', he failed to develop any sustained agenda on this issue. With regard to pension policy, he ambiguously suggested that a 'commission' should be set up to advance a reform agenda. However, elderly voters favour pension security rather than changes that are generally associated with spending cuts. Finally, Laschet claimed that he stood for 'modernisation' and 'climate protection without damaging the economy'. But he was in fact his own worst enemy in committing a large number of tactical mistakes during campaigning. The worst single event was that he was filmed laughing when visiting a flooding disaster area in his home region. The pictures of the laughing Laschet became a major talking point on social media and damaged his personal standing no matter how unfair their usage happened to be. Thus, Laschet failed to capitalise on his initial front runner status owing to a combination of personal mistakes and the structural exhaustion of the CDU party machine.

Turning to the SPD candidate Scholz: he had been nominated as candidate for chancellor by his party after narrowly losing the contest for the position of party leader against a more leftist team in September 2019. Scholz clearly belongs to the right wing of his party, which is usually described as 'social liberal' in the

German context. During the highly unpopular SPD-led welfare cuts of the early twenty-first century, he had not been visible as a core actor even though he had then acted as the general secretary of the SPD. Nearly two decades later, Scholz entered the 2021 contest as someone who had always been around, but had never been associated with particular projects or political ideas. In an unexpected turn of events, his weakness became his strength. Living up to his nickname of 'Scholzomat', he managed to advance his campaign by carefully avoiding controversial statements. Moreover, a single well-targeted promise to pensioners that social insurance pensions would be safe under a SPD-led government delivered a strong shift in the pensioner vote away from the CDU and toward his own party.

Apart from this single issue, he mostly talked about topics that were difficult to judge, such as energy security, but suggested economic competency on his part as finance minister and deputy chancellor in Merkel's government. Scholz faced two major potential challenges that could have damaged his campaign, namely the degree of his personal involvement with the 'CumEx' and 'Wirecard' economic scandals. In the former case, Scholz was accused of negligence as then mayor of the city state of Hamburg in not enforcing overdue tax payments from a private Hamburg-based bank which subsequently became insolvent. In the latter case, the Wirecard company, listed in the German share index (DAX) of the thirty largest companies since 2018, collapsed in early 2020 owing to large-scale accounting fraud. Scholz was, as finance minister since 2018, in charge of the supervisory body tasked to fight fraud and money laundering. Throughout the election campaign, Scholz consistently denied any direct involvement in the two scandals and instead stressed that supervisory bodies had been strengthened during his time in office. The public prosecutor conducted two raids on offices of former officials before and after the federal election and it remains to be seen whether the investigation could still focus on Scholz at some future point.¹²

¹²M. Jung, 'Cum-Ex-Ermittlungen: Die Spur führt ins Zentrum der Hamburger SPD', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28 September 2021.

Finally, the Greens' chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock quickly turned out to be a poor choice and became a burden for her party. It transpired that Baerbock had inflated her CV by stating that she was a specialist in 'international law', although she had never finished her academic studies in Germany. Moreover, a book published under her name turned out to be heavily plagiarised. These mistakes highlighted that she lacked the experience of a senior politician and had in fact spent all her life within the Green party apparatus as a party official. Moreover, the Greens also suffered from an objective dilemma, namely that many German voters acknowledged that climate change might be the main challenge of the current era, but hardly anyone was willing to accept personal tax increases in order to contribute to a greener future.¹³ Thus, Baerbock's effort to present the Green party as the necessary driver of a climate change agenda—something that distinguished her party from Christian and Social Democrats—failed to clarify how such plans could be reconciled with social justice considerations.

As for the three other opposition parties, the rightist AfD, liberal FDP and Left party, they were all disadvantaged in media coverage which strongly focussed on the 'triell' at the expense of the smaller parties. The AfD also suffered from internal conflict between those who wished to pose as liberal conservatives and others favouring a nationalistic protest movement. The latter wing dominated the pre-election party conference in which the AfD suggested exiting the EU (the 'Dexit') and 'national neutralism' in the tradition of Otto von Bismarck. The party's main communication effort with the electorate was through online media, the only viable strategy when faced with offline societal exclusion.

In its turn, the FDP strongly focussed on its party leader, Christian Lindner, who presented himself as someone standing against tax increases and favouring a pro-business modernisation of Germany, based on rapid digitalisation and efforts to achieve technology leadership with regard to green innovation. In a secondary role, the vice-chairman of the federal parliament representing the FDP,

Wolfgang Kubicki, attacked the Covid measures of the Merkel government as illiberal, anti-business and disproportionate to the threat level.¹⁴ The combination of Lindner as the strategic leader and of Kubicki as the person needling the government (Merkel and Söder in particular) allowed for a division of labour that delivered a slight increase in the overall vote share for the FDP.

Finally, the Left party faced the strategic dilemma of whether the party should continue focussing on a leftist opposition role or positioning itself as a possible component of a future left-of-centre coalition government, together with the SPD and Greens. The leadership essentially maintained strategic ambiguity between radical and pragmatic party wings. This failed, however, to satisfy any of the involved groups. On one hand, an urban and younger clientele was focussing on identity politics and efforts to overtake the Greens in terms of demanding radical shifts away from a carbon-based economy. On the other hand, the more traditional trade unionist wing highlighted that green taxes should be fought as being a threat to working class living standards and that the party must re-focus on representing lower earners, pensioners and the unemployed.¹⁵ The most prominent representative of this strand of opinion, Sahra Wagenknecht, further suggested that contemporary 'lifestyle leftists' had alienated themselves from broader society by focussing on 'symbolism and politically correct language', rather than 'boring old-style policies of social justice'.¹⁶ In the end, the party lost voters in virtually all directions and especially to the SPD.

Germany's 2021 election results

The outcome of the federal election consolidated the existing six-party system.

¹⁴ Bundestagsvizepräsident Wolfgang Kubicki: "Söder ist eine traurige Figur", *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, 19 October 2020; 'Wolfgang Kubicki: Kanzlerin hat sich Dinge angemaßt, die ihr nicht zustanden', *welt.de*, 30 July 2021.

¹⁵ K. Stemmler, 'Interview mit Sevim Dagdelen: "Es ist brutal und bitter, zeichnete sich aber ab"', *junge welt*, 30 September 2021.

¹⁶ S. Wagenknecht, *Die Selbstgerechten: Mein Gegenprogramm für Gemeinsinn und Zusammenhalt*, Frankfurt/M., Campus Verlag, 2021, ch. 1.

¹³ U. Schulte, 'Mäßiges Wahlergebnis der Grünen: Bitte keine Realitätsflucht!', *tageszeitung (taz)*, 27 August 2021.

Germany's party system is increasingly based on medium-sized and smaller parties and a high degree of volatility in the electorate. Three parties gained and three lost vote shares. The SPD came in first with 25.7 per cent of the votes (+5.2 per cent) while the CDU/CSU lost 8.9 per cent, scoring 24.1 per cent. The Greens and the FDP gained vote shares ending with 14.8 per cent (+5.8 per cent) and 11.5 per cent (+0.7 per cent), respectively. Support for the two other opposition parties, the AfD and the Left party, declined, achieving 10.3 per cent (-2.3 per cent) and 4.9 per cent (-4.3 per cent) respectively. There were gains for numerous smaller parties who together collected 8.6 per cent of the votes. These included the centrist 'Free Voters' with 2.4 per cent (7.5 per cent in Bavaria) and the newly founded 'Grassroots-Democracy Party' of critics of German Covid policies, scoring 1.4 per cent.

When looking at a map of Germany displaying the largest parties in localities (*Gemeinden*) and electoral districts (*Wahlkreise*), the election result reveals the existence of numerous and deep cleavages.¹⁷ Germany is regionally divided along the north-south and west-east axes. Most northern, central and north eastern regions of Germany experienced a recovery of the SPD as the strongest party, while CDU and CSU maintained strong positions in the south. However, support for the CDU in the east collapsed, while the AfD consolidated its dominance in Saxony and other parts of eastern Germany. The Greens continued to mostly enjoy support in urban areas. Their gains were modest in comparison to opinion polls at the beginning of 2021 that had suggested vote shares above 20 per cent. The Left party is by now also mainly an urban force. After losing nearly half of its vote and most of its support in rural areas of the former East Germany, the Left only re-entered parliament because of a special rule that allows a party winning three electoral districts to regain proportional representation in line with its overall vote share. By winning three urban districts (two in Berlin and one in Leipzig), the Left narrowly survived in parliament. As for the FDP, the

party made modest gains across the country except in two regions in which it is currently represented in coalition governments (North-Rhine Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein).

Beyond regionalism, social class and age cohort cleavages were also highly significant. No party enjoyed dominance in any single social class. Among the self-employed and white collar employees, for example, the 'bourgeois parties' (namely CDU/CSU and FDP) declined, although they retained the largest share of support with 26 and 19 per cent respectively, followed by SPD and Greens with 16 per cent each. Among blue collar employees, the SPD regained the largest vote share with 26 per cent, bypassing the AfD with 20 per cent and the CDU with 20 per cent. The most significant shift in electoral preferences that ultimately decided the tight race between the CDU/CSU and the SPD was the massive shift among pensioners from the former to the latter. Here, the SPD gained 35 per cent of the elderly vote (+11 per cent compared to the last election in 2017), while the CDU now achieved 34 per cent (-7 per cent).¹⁸ Conversely, the very small cohort of first time voters supported Greens and FDP with 23 per cent each, which underlined that young people were alienated from the policies of the grand coalition.¹⁹ Yet, for the foreseeable future, older voters will continue to decide German election outcomes.

Finally, glancing at how voters perceived party competencies in dealing with problems, the CDU/CSU dramatically lost in trust. CDU/CSU voters perceived economic performance and employment as the most significant topics, but only 32 per cent thought that the CDU was competent (-25 per cent compared to 2017). The same collapse in confidence in the CDU was visible across the board regarding issues such as law and order, foreign policy and asylum and migration. Conversely, SPD voters believed that social security was the most significant topic and that

¹⁷'Ergebnisse der Bundestagswahl: So hat ihre Gemeinde gewählt', *Zeit Online*, 5 October 2021; <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2021-09/ergebnisse-bundestagswahl-gemeinde-karte> (accessed 1 November 2021).

¹⁸'Wen wählten Arbeiter und Angestellte?', *Tagesschau*, 27 September 2021; <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2021-09-26-BT-DE/umfrage-job.shtml> (accessed 1 November 2021).

¹⁹'Wen wählten Jüngere und Ältere?', *Tagesschau*, 27 September 2021; <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2021-09-26-BT-DE/umfrage-alter.shtml> (accessed 1 November 2021).

the party's competency had increased slightly when compared to the last election. Overall, the electorate was mostly concerned about economic and social issues. The two exceptions were supporters of the Greens, focussing almost single-mindedly on climate and environment (82 per cent) and AfD voters mostly voicing anxiety about migration (40 per cent) and coronavirus restrictions (18 per cent).²⁰ Thus, these two parties represent opposite extremes in German society, not least because the former receive mostly urban and the latter predominantly rural support.

According to the election result, three coalition scenarios would enjoy a majority in parliament, namely the 'traffic light coalition' (SPD, FDP and Greens), 'Jamaica' (CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens) or another grand coalition government. The left-of-centre option of SPD, Greens and Left party falls short of the necessary majority and is therefore impossible. Since the elections, the Christian Democrats have been engaged in infighting about who is to blame for the defeat. The failed candidate, Laschet, and the Bavarian prime minister, Söder, are visibly at odds with each other and the party is divided into different wings. This infighting has destroyed whatever negotiating position the Christian Democrats still possessed. Thus, the 'traffic light' option is by now the only viable coalition choice. A centrist government of SPD, Greens and FDP is almost certain to form once compromises on controversial issues such as taxation, climate protection and social security are worked out.

Conclusion

Pre-election surveys suggested that German voters were mostly concerned with bread and butter issues, namely social protection, solid economic policies, high employment and also environmentalism. Conversely, only a minority focussed on the government's Covid management as a central electoral concern. A large majority of voters desire a return of pre-pandemic 'normalcy' and favour protective measures over disruptive change. However,

the question is whether the political actors still possess instruments to deliver such an outcome in a multi-crisis context. Highly disruptive Covid policies have produced a rapid growth in public debt, inflationary pressures and the disruption of supply chains in Germany and across the globe. A broader socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis is in the making and as long as calamities continue to multiply, nervous day-to-day tactics will triumph over efforts to introduce strategic change. This is also visible in the coalition negotiations between SPD, Greens and FDP that are seemingly expected to square the circle, namely to combine efforts at stabilising public finances without raising taxes (the FDP demand) with promises of large-scale investment in public infrastructure and environmental projects (the former suggested by the SPD and the latter by the Greens).

German centrist policies were apparently confirmed in the election. The combined vote share of the two centrist parties—CDU/CSU and SPD—declined only slightly to 49.8 per cent in 2021 compared to 53.5 per cent in 2017. The two traditional centrist parties, therefore, still co-exist with four 'ideological' parties, namely the Greens, AfD, FDP and the Left. Crucially, the electoral fortunes of 'ideological' parties continue to depend on what the centre parties are offering the electorate. The Greens have failed to break this pattern, since their electoral appeal remains limited to prosperous middle class voters. German-style coalition politics therefore enforces alliances between centrist and ideological parties, while clear departures in a 'right' or 'left' direction are currently not possible. In particular, the AfD is considered beyond the pale of present-day coalition politics, while the much weakened Left party is realistically not acceptable to the pro-NATO SPD and Greens as a coalition partner at the national level.

Still, such apparent continuity should not distract from what is substantially at stake. German society is more deeply divided today than it was at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Moreover, present-day challenges, such as how to distribute the costs of the coronavirus crisis, or of 'green' transformations (higher energy costs might be 'green' while victimising the poor), are difficult to solve by just wishing for centrist compromises. When looking at the larger picture, Germany's

²⁰ 'Welche Themen entschieden die Wahl?', *Tagesschau*, 26 September 2021; <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2021-09-26-BT-DE/umfrage-wahlscheidend.shtml> (accessed 1 November 2021).

ultimate political choice is between reflexive modernisation based on open deliberation or technocracy. The former choice suggests that Germany must sustain the spirit of liberal democracy as enshrined in the country's constitution, stressing human dignity as a core value of public policy. This suggests that the country should not proceed any further along the lines of Covid authoritarianism, namely emergency rule based on bureaucratic inertia without transparent public debate or effective parliamentary and judicial controls.²¹ The permanent radicalisation of such deceptively 'protective' policies toward a 'no vaccination, no job' logic—the exclusion of the unvaccinated

from public life—would mean that German democracy is permanently damaged. Thus, policy makers must resist the idea that the 'solution' of the current multi-level crisis is to be found in technocracy or great resets. Whether Germany's centre can hold depends on whether the actors can find ways to overcome the lethargy of the Merkel era without opening new divisions in an already fragile society. The task appears rather challenging and success is not a foregone conclusion.

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²¹G. Schattauer, 'Ex-Richter Hans-Jürgen Papier übt harsche Kritik: Deutschland muss sich aus "Corona-Schockstarre" lösen', *Focus online*, 20 September 2021; https://www.focus.de/politik/harte-kritik-an-regierungskurs-ex-verfassungsrichter-deutschland-muss-sich-aus-corona-schockstarre-loesen_id_24256593.html (accessed 1 November 2021).