

IASS-Blogpost

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German Election

The Desire for Continuity in Change

The SPD's success in the Bundestag elections is surprising, even though the polls predicted this outcome in the days and weeks leading up to the election. In July, polls by infratest-dimap and the Elections Research Group suggested that the SPD could win as little as 15-16 percent of the vote and a neck-and-neck race between the CDU/CSU and the Greens seemed likely. But things turned out differently, and now the Social Democrats are the victors, even though the SPD's 25 percent win is a far cry from the results returned by previous SPD chancellors.

The SPD's comeback was soon explained by the mistakes made by other candidates. And indeed, the Greens' bumbling performance early in the race and the very uneven campaign of the CDU/CSU played into the SPD's hands. But it would be a mistake to claim that Olaf Scholz was merely the beneficiary of others' mistakes.

Another, more important building block of Scholz' success was his down-to-earth and oddly uncharismatic persona, for which he was widely scorned just a few months ago. Scholz positioned himself as a male version of Angela Merkel with a social justice bonus.

The fact that Scholz – and with him the SPD – have met with such success with this approach reflects a widespread desire among German voters for stability and continuity. The pandemic and the increasingly urgent climate crisis have brought home the need to create a vastly more sustainable society. The climate crisis was the number one issue for the majority of voters in this election – something that has never happened before. While German voters are broadly willing to pursue far-reaching change in response to the climate crisis, the pandemic has shown that this willingness has its limits – a global comparison shows that the desire for a return to the old normality is greatest in the Federal Republic.

In a sense, Olaf Scholz was an incarnation of this amalgam of desire for change and continuity. Annalena Baerbock stood for change and she did not tire of calling for a new beginning. Armin Laschet – who remarked on the deadly July floods in Germany that “you don't change policies just because of one day like this...” – stood for business as usual.

Climate policy and coalition negotiations

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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The most likely government constellation is a traffic light coalition (SPD, FDP, Greens). The election loser and his party lack the political capital to take the chancellorship and it is unlikely they will make a determined effort. Either way, we can expect to see a three-party coalition that cuts across the traditional political camps of black/yellow and red/green.

What does this mean for climate policy? All of the parties (except the Alternative for Germany, AfD) agree on the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2040 to 2045 – but they have fundamentally different ideas on how to go about this. When it comes to the role of the state in the fight against the climate crisis, the FDP and the CDU/CSU see the free market as the decisive lever for producing the kinds of technological innovations that will deliver climate neutrality. The Greens and the SPD believe that regulatory policy is necessary to steer market forces in the desired direction.

But this difference is not an insurmountable hurdle for three-party constellations beyond the old political camps (whose boundaries are blurring in any case). The Greens, for example, have called for an amendment to the debt brake that would establish an exception for investments to finance new infrastructure. On the other hand, the SPD and FDP want to maintain the debt brake in its present form. The SPD and the Greens want to raise taxes for very high income earners; the Liberals, on the other hand, not only reject tax increases but are even proposing cuts.

The Greens want to phase out sales of combustion engine vehicles; the FDP has rejected this proposal and suggest that the market should. In real life, the market and the automotive industry have already made their call and the future is electric. The spectre of a ban on combustion engine vehicles is no longer a possibility that carmakers fear. When it comes to the future of railway company Deutsche Bahn, the Greens want to operate its infrastructure under public ownership, expand it and separate it from operations – a vision that finds common ground with the FDP. The SPD will side with the trade unions on this issue and reject the proposal. Finally, when it comes expanding renewable energy generation and adopting some form of carbon pricing, the parties might differ on the details but the ultimate goal is undisputed.

The success of the negotiations is less likely to falter on matters of content – instead, they will be decided by the willingness of senior members' to forge a coalition and their ability to secure compromises that save face for all sides and to communicate these to their respective party bases. Climate policy and government action

The real challenge will begin after the chancellor and ministers have been sworn in. The compromises found to achieve Germany's climate targets must then be implemented and will lead to systemic changes in industry, mobility, the energy system, agriculture, and more. Jobs in fossil industries will disappear, new ones will be created in the renewable sector. This transformation has been underway for a long time in Germany's coal districts; in the automotive industry, it is imminent and it will cost jobs. These transformations will inevitably affect people's everyday lives. Our mobility and eating habits will change – and not necessarily for the worse.

However, to varying degrees throughout the election campaign, all of the political parties employed narratives which suggested that protecting the climate would have little impact on day-to-day life. The FDP suggested that technological innovation alone would be the solution; Olaf Scholz limited his climate narrative to proposals to help industry provide more renewable energy and even the Greens – still smarting from the Veggie Day debacle – studiously avoided any mention of how climate action could change everyday life.



While it is understandable that political parties build their campaigns around narratives that promise continuity in the face of change, it is a decision that can come back to haunt them. If we take a step back, it is obvious that we can only tackle the climate and biodiversity crises and the inequitable distribution of wealth by making far-reaching changes – transformations, even. It is right to focus on the systemic changes needed to achieve these goals. But people are part and parcel of these systems. They will be affected. And it is people – their relationships, their values, and their habits – that bring change to systems. Without their involvement, the transformation towards sustainability will not succeed.