What the Germans Did, and How

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In Sunday's German election, Angela Merkel and the conjoined conservative parties she heads—the Christian Democratic Union and its Bavarian partner, the Christian Social Union—won big. Very big: no one has won bigger since East and West Germany were reunified almost a quarter century ago. Just about every newspaper and broadcaster this side of North Korea used the same word: TRIUMPH.

What does this tremendous conservative victory mean? In a nutshell, it means that the incoming German government will be somewhat to the left of the outgoing one.

Say what?

To see why, let's take a walk through the tall grass.

There were thirty-four parties on the ballot. The vast majority were the political equivalent of street cranks holding hand-lettered "The End Is Near" signs—the Marxist-Leninist Party, the Party of Bible-Abiding Christians, the Violets for Spiritual Politics (just what it sounds like). That sort of thing.

Six parties were serious enough to garner more than a million of the 44.3 million votes cast. Here's how they did, percentage-wise:

CDU/CSU: 41.5
Social Democratic Party (SPD): 25.7
The Left (Die Linke): 8.6
Alliance '90/The Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen): 8.4
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Free Democratic Party (FDP): 4.8
Alternative for Germany (AfD): 4.7

Under Germany's ingenious electoral system (more fully explained later in this post, for those who can't get enough of this stuff), parties are represented in the ruling parliamentary body, the Bundestag, in exact proportion to their percentage of the national vote.

However, a party has to get at least five per cent to be represented at all. This is Germany's way of inoculating itself against the proliferation of tiny, often crazy parties that bedeviled the Weimar Republic and still bedevils the Israeli Knesset. Five per cent or more: seats in parliament. Under five per cent: no seats. Therefore, only the four parties above the line made the grade this time.

In the previous election, in 2009, five parties made it, and one was the centrist FDP, which, with 14.6 per cent, had its best showing ever. That was enough to give the Christian Democrats and the FDP, its traditional partner, the Bundestag majority they needed to continue their coalition and keep Merkel in power for a second term.

The FDP is a "liberal" party in the European sense. It's business-friendly, regulation-unfriendly, and pro-free markets in economic matters, but leftish on social issues such as abortion and marriage equality. (The FDP's Guido Westerwelle, who was Merkel's vice chancellor and is now her foreign minister, is openly gay.) This year, though, the FDP played down its social stands in favor of its economic libertarianism. The result was a catastrophe: the FDP's worst showing ever, and its exclusion from the Bundestag for the first time since its founding in 1948.

The new numbers are interesting. The Christian Democrats—the CDU/CSU combo—now have three hundred and eleven of the Bundestag's six hundred and thirty seats, or 49.4 per cent. The three other parties have three hundred and nineteen seats, or 50.6 per cent, among them. All three are left of center. But the SDP is allergic to Die Linke, which is the child of a marriage between the old East German Socialist Unity (i.e., Communist) party and various West German far-left groupings, with a smattering of dissident ex-Social Democrats. Notwithstanding their bare parliamentary majority, a coalition of the three left-of-center parties is out of the question.

The wild card in this election was the brand-new Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which, while falling just below the threshold, did twice as well as early polling predicted. The AfD is a strange bird. It's right of center, but not too far right. Its main issue—almost its only issue—is the euro, which it would like to rid Germany of, along with its connection to Greece and other troublesome members of the European Union (though it would like to keep the Union itself, albeit in weakened form). Unlike right-wing Euroskeptic parties in other European countries, it steers clear of overt hostility to immigrants. Most of the AfD's vote probably came at the Christian Democrats' expense, but even if had managed to top five per cent, a coalition would have been prohibitively unlikely. Merkel is committed to the euro.

To form her third-term government, therefore, Merkel has no choice but to partner with one of the remaining three parties. Die Linke? Uh, no. The Greens? Not inconceivable—CDU-Green coalitions have briefly governed two of the Federal Republic's sixteen states—but close to it.

Q.E.D.: one way or another, Chancellor Merkel is going to have to put together a "black-red" coalition with the Social Democrats. It won't be pretty, but Germans are good at making sausage. It will be done. Ipso facto, Merkel III will be to the left of Merkels I and II—but only a little. There will be countervailing pressures on her, such as trying to plug the leakage to the AfD. That will reduce the size of the leftward creep, but it won't reverse its direction. The biggest change, and it's not all that big, will be that she will ease up a bit on her austerity policies, both domestically and in the European Union.

It's all a little strange and rather roundabout, but a good case can be made that this modest shift is exactly what "the German people"—admittedly a somewhat mythical beast, like "the American people"—wanted. They like Merkel, and they're glad that they've been spared the brunt of the transatlantic Great Recession. But they also want to protect their generous social benefits. And while they think that Greece, Spain, and Italy are kind of getting what they deserve, they also feel a twinge of guilt at the extra suffering that the German government's insistence on austerity is imposing on the flesh-and-blood human beings who live there.

And now, ta-da, what you've all been waiting for: the promised ultra-wonky description of exactly how you will vote when you get so thoroughly disgusted with American politics that you defect to Germany.

You get a paper ballot. The print on one side is black; on the other, it's blue. On the black side, you vote for a candidate to be the Bundestag member from your district, one of two hundred and ninety-nine in the country. As in elections for the U.S. Congress and the British Parliament, the plurality winner gets the seat. On the blue side, you vote for a party, usually but not necessarily the same party as the local candidate you selected. A minimum of two hundred and ninety-nine more members are elected this way, in proportion to the parties' share of the national total (although,

again, only if that share is at least five per cent). These members come from lists drawn up at the national level.

Until this year, the size of the Bundestag was limited to five hundred and ninety-eight seats, or two times two hundred and ninety-nine. One party—usually the Christian Democrats—would almost always end up electing more members in the district-by-district, single-member voting than in the national, proportional half of the voting. This was almost inevitable, on account of the peculiarities of winner-take-all elections. If Party A wins in a lot of one-sided districts while Party B wins in a lot of less one-sided districts, Party B will end up with a bigger share of seats than votes. This phenomenon is, or should be, familiar to Americans: it's the main reason, more than gerrymandering, that the House of Representatives is controlled by Republicans, even though a majority of voters favored Democratic House candidates last November.

In 2009, Germany's Supreme Court declared this setup unconstitutional. As a consequence, as many extra second-vote seats now get added as it takes to make the outcome perfectly proportional. That's why there will be six hundred and thirty members instead of five hundred and ninety-eight this time. Next time there may be more. Or there may be fewer.

The German system, known as "mixed-member proportional," has its advantages. Through the first-vote seats, the Bundestag retains a direct tie between local communities and the center. And the party-list, at-large seats make it possible for people with national reputations and national perspectives to find their way into the national legislature. Minorities, political and otherwise, don't have to be geographically concentrated to be represented. Turnout is high (71.5 per cent this time), because you can cast a meaningful vote even if you live in a "safe" district. For the parties, the prospect of having to form coalitions makes campaigns less scorched-earth, and encourages moderation and civility.

The formula is well-suited to a big federal republic like Germany—or, for that matter, like the United States. Germany's system, after all, was designed under American tutelage after the Second World War. We might have had something like it, too, if the framers of the American Constitution had known about it. But, like railroads, telephones, and the Internet, it hadn't been invented yet.

Photograph by Sean Gallup/Getty.