

E-ISSN 2014-0843
D.L.: B-8438-2012

opinión

MERKEL AND WHO?

496
SEPTEMBER
2017

Eckart Woertz, Senior Research Fellow and Research Coordinator CIDOB

Angela Merkel will be the next chancellor of Germany. The question is only: with the help of who and how will this affect Germany's domestic and foreign policy? Martin Schulz, the candidate of the social democrats (SPD), had a surge in the polls after his party nominated him as candidate in January, but this sugar high was short lived. A vague and mildly leftist message of more social justice fell short to sustainably rally voters' interest. Like Merkel, Schulz airs the charisma of an office clerk. Not enough to inspire moods of change within a languid and mentally conservative electorate. In Germany, chancellors are not voted for, but voted out and it seems that people do not have enough of Merkel just yet. They are ready to grant her a fourth term and see in her a steady hand during uncertain times.

The situation now is as it was a year ago: Merkel's CDU has a comfortable lead over the SPD in the polls. Schulz' party only musters 24 percent and trails far behind Merkel's CDU, which has climbed up to 38 percent. A center left coalition of the SPD with the Greens and the left-wing party Die Linke that appeared a distinct possibility in early spring, now seems all but impossible. The CDU on the other hand might be able to form an absolute majority of seats with any of the following three combinations: a) a coalition with the Liberals (FDP) who poll at 8 percent, b) if that is not enough a coalition with the Liberals and the Greens, who also poll at 8 percent or c) a reissue of the current grand coalition with the SPD. Cooperation with Die Linke (9 percent) is out of the question for programmatic reasons and like all other parties the CDU has decided to shun the upcoming right wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD, 8 percent) as it rejects its xenophobic message.

A coalition with the FDP would be a revival of the coalition that ruled during the Kohl era and the second term of Merkel. Known as a lobby party of small business owners and lawyers, the FDP has sought to enhance its appeal by sharpening its profile in questions such as civil liberties, gay rights and the digital economy. After it failed to pass the 5 percent hurdle during the last elections, it is expected to safely reenter parliament this time. During their time in exile the Liberals have resisted the temptation to embark on a Euro-critical course, yet they are staunchly

skeptical of more far European reaching integration measures that French President Macron has suggested such as Eurobonds or a common Eurozone treasury. In a coalition with the Liberals it would be more difficult for Merkel to meet the French half way. The Greens on the other hand would likely question tax cuts that are on the wish list of the FDP and its relatively well-heeled clientele. They would also oppose more traditional industrial policies like support for the diesel scandal battered German auto industry and would condition them on more far-reaching transitions of the transportation system towards electric cars, public transport and renewable energies. They would also challenge the conservative stance of Merkel's sister party, the Bavarian CSU, on issues of migration. A renewed grand coalition with the SPD would promise more of the same. It might appeal to Merkel's conservative instincts, but it would put the social democrats in a continuous bind. Forced to sign off on coalition promises as a junior partner they would be unable to sharpen their profile and work on alternative coalitions that might push them back into the Chancellery one day.

Forming a coalition will likely be not too difficult for Merkel. Political differences across the political spectrum are smaller than they used to be. There has been "social-democratization" of the CDU on conservative and cultural issues and "liberalization" of the social democrats on economic issues; after all it was the SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder who pushed through the neoliberal reform of the labor law in the early 2000s. The Liberals have opened up their economy-only agenda and the Greens are much more pragmatic today than during the heady 1980s and 1990s when they had a stronger left wing. Socio-economic fault lines that have informed right-wing populism elsewhere exist in Germany as well, but are less pronounced and emotionalized.

This comfortable consensualism has led to a dull German election campaign that aroused little passion. Merkel agreed to only one carefully circumscribed TV duel with Schulz, which was akin to watching paint dry. Beside pleasantries and elaborations on legal procedures and a planned road toll, migration covered a longer stretch. It was dealt with in non-populist fashion, probably because it has dropped down the priority list of German voters after refugee numbers have fallen in 2016 and 2017. Schulz said that he would cut off EU accession negotiations with Turkey, adopting a long held opinion of the right wing of the CDU, but this was not entirely surprising after Erdogan's vitriolic attacks on German politicians and the arrest of German journalists in Turkey. Farther reaching strategic questions, such as the stance towards Russia, Brexit negotiations and the future of the EU were remarkably absent. Educational reform and the digitalization of the economy did not figure either.

The meandering boredom of the German election campaign and the civil behavior of candidates have been greeted by some as a welcome contrast in the age of Trump. Yet the provincial navel gazing of a nation that is the largest net-exporter of the world and a supposed stalwart of liberal world order is also somewhat irritating.