

INTRODUCTION: POLITICS AND POWER AFTER THE 2017 BUNDESTAG ELECTION

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Although it has not been that long since the articles of the previous special issue devoted to the 2017 Bundestag election and its aftermath have been published, the political situation in Germany appears to have stabilized. After almost six months without a new government, German politics has sunk back into a kind of late-Merkel era normality. Public opinion polls continue to show that the CDU/CSU is slightly above its election outcome, the SPD is still down in the 17–18 percent range, the FDP has lost about 2 percent of its support, while the AfD, Greens and Left Party are up 1–2 percent.¹

There are certainly new faces all around—Andrea Nahles was endorsed as SPD chair in late April 2018 and continues to run the party’s Bundestag fraction. SPD Finance Minister Olaf Scholz has presided over record tax revenues and is even contemplating tax cuts. SPD Foreign Minister Heiko Maas is seemingly everywhere. On the other hand, the rapid disappearance from the public arena of former social democratic leaders Martin Schulz and Sigmar Gabriel is almost unprecedented. The AfD chugs along, apparently not losing any of the momentum it gained over 2017 despite incessant in-fighting and a series of provocations. With Bavarian state elections looming in October, the CSU has a new minister-president with Markus Söder. That party has decided to take on the right-populists through its own rightward turn, for example decreeing the installation of crosses in government offices in Bavaria and through federal Interior Minister Horst Seehofer pushing the older, provocative formulation that “Islam does not belong to Germany.”²

Presiding over everything still is Chancellor Angela Merkel, now in her fourth term as chancellor. If she lasts, in 2019, she will surpass Konrad Adenauer as the second-longest serving head of government. She is even starting to be referred to as the “eternal chancellor” just like Helmut Kohl two decades ago.³ As before, she has been kept busy with international affairs. Tensions especially with the Trump Administration in the United States over the Iran deal and trade issues have dominated her time as of late. The



EU budget, resolution to the Brexit negotiations, the Syrian situation, a new crisis in Israel/Palestine, and responses to Macron's ambitious EU reform plans will soon have to be addressed. Nevertheless, her weakened position is evident to all, and she is seemingly comfortable slowly fading from the active political scene.

The contributions assembled in this second special issue continue the in-depth examination of German politics after the September 2017 Bundestag elections. This issue begins with Frank Decker and Philipp Adorf's examination of the party system, in which they note that the Bundestag shifted to the right overall. A certain symmetry has emerged in a new six-party system with three parties of the left (SPD, Greens, Left) and, now, three also on the right (CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD). After analyzing the factors that led to the election result, the authors examine the new coalition formation environment. It will take a while for the parties to adapt to the novel options: grand coalitions as in Austria, a partisan divide-spanning coalition of the center, or a Scandinavian model with coalitions from one political camp, but tolerated by an extremist party. The arrival of right-wing populism on the political stage has set many dynamics in motion, not the least of which is a necessary recalibration of the catch-all parties.

Next, Louise K. Davidson-Schmich delves into LGBTI issues during the campaign. After recounting the evolution of LGBTI rights in Germany, she analyzes the parties' positions on a range of issues deemed important by this community, including marriage and family rights, anti-discrimination measures, health, and everyday acceptance. The Left and Green parties were the most supportive across almost all issue areas with the CDU/CSU and especially the AfD the least. Overall, the campaign ignored the vast majority of these issues with the big exception of marriage equality, which was achieved in June 2017 through an open vote of the Bundestag. An important finding was the agency of a critical actor, in this case veteran Green politician Volker Beck, who had diligently campaigned for this right over many years. Clay Clemens looks at the CDU/CSU's lackluster election campaign. Concluding that it was "ambivalent"—as manifested by the result on election day—he highlights several reasons such as internal disagreements over Merkel's "modernization" of the CDU and more generally pro- and anti-Merkel camps within the party, continued fallout from her 2015 decision on migration, a campaign strategy that bizarrely bred complacency among many supporters while mobilizing skeptics, and tactical mistakes. Clemens highlights the deep internal division over strategy: the "Merkelians'" preference to compete for the center versus opponents' position that a battle between the partisan camps (*Lagerwahlkampf*) would be the only suc-

cessful path—a strategic disagreement left unresolved on election day. One might also add that sub-par campaign messaging did not help. One key slogan was “For a Germany in which we live well and gladly,” which was then transformed into an awkward and widely mocked hashtag #fedidwgugl.

Next, David Art delves into the success of the Alternative for Germany. He notes that the party’s breakthrough electoral result—largely due to Merkel’s policy on refugees—shows that the strategy of containment of the far right no longer works as it once did. Despite the establishment’s continued efforts to combat the party, the AfD is rapidly normalizing, as right-populist parties have throughout Europe in recent years. That said, Art does think it is plausible that the party will implode just like many right-wing precursors in previous decades. If it does not, however, the ramifications of the AfD’s institutionalization will be felt far beyond Germany’s borders. Andreas M. Wüst then looks in depth at the situation of the SPD and the new grand coalition. After looking at some of the reasons for the SPD’s poor performance on election day, the author outlines the twisted road the party took to agree to a continuation of the grand coalition. A detailed analysis of the coalition agreement shows just how many social democratic priorities were adopted especially in social policy—although the party was not able to push through its preferences on migration-related issues. The article concludes by noting the risks to the coalition partners and the German party system more generally of continuing such consensual governments in perpetuity.

The final two contributions turn to European and foreign policy. Christian Schweiger’s article is a rather critical take on Germany’s dominant leadership role in the European Union in recent years. German leadership since the Euro Crisis, including policy decisions during the refugee crisis of 2015, have greatly contributed to the severe legitimacy issues within the EU today. Schweiger faults German leadership for empowering right populist parties throughout the continent and contributing quite a bit to the Brexit decision in 2016. He thinks Merkel must focus on creating a more inclusive agenda for the European Union through rebuilding relationships with France and Central European countries, especially Poland. If a more consensual approach is not achieved, the further disintegration of the EU is a distinct possibility. Finally, Steve Szabo provides a sober assessment of the new coalition’s foreign policy. The likely situation is an international environment with as many if not more challenges than in previous years, including Turkey, Russia, and the Transatlantic relationship, as well as lingering issues with France and the European Union. These challenges, however, will be met with less capacity than in previous governments. Many relevant policy portfolios are now occupied by the coalition partners, meaning that internal disagreements

within the government will result in feeble policy responses. Merkel herself is weakened and will be less able to assert influence from the Chancellery. All of this likely means that the new grand coalition will be transitional and that real policy change and robust policy responses will have to await the next government and a generational turnover in leadership.

All in all, these contributions convey a sober, even pessimistic tone. Perhaps political science has also now become a dismal science in the wake of rising illiberalism and populism across the globe. It appears that there is not much positive to report from German politics currently—a bad mood that certainly resonates with that of the German electorate. This overall assessment seems like a bit of a pity, though. It was not even three years ago that so many voices across the world lauded Merkel’s courageous decision to pursue a humanitarian response to the unprecedented refugee and migration crisis. As easy as it can be to criticize specific policy decisions, Merkel’s various governments have rather successfully muddled through some complex and existential crises such as the Euro Crisis—or have successfully enough contained de-stabilizing events in Russia/Ukraine, Brexit, and a trade war with the U.S. (at least thus far).

Domestically, the German economy is almost unprecedented in its performance. Public finances have not been this good for decades. At about 3.5 percent, the unemployment rate is the lowest since before reunification—and by some accounts the lowest since the end of the great postwar *Wirtschaftswunder*.⁴ The crime rate is the lowest for twenty-five years (although certain hate crimes have increased).⁵ Even the birth rate is up.⁶ As Merkel’s long tenure at the top of German, European, and world politics slowly comes to an end—just like a slowly enveloping twilight (*Dämmerung*)—as much as the negatives need to be mentioned, we should most certainly not forget all of the good that her leadership has produced.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/>, accessed 14 May 2018.
- 2 <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/bayern-kreuze-behoerden-kritik-1.3957179>, accessed 14 May 2018.
- 3 <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/merkels-spitznamen-von-kohls-maedchen-zur-ewigen-kanzlerin-1.3904881>, accessed 15 May 2018.
- 4 http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_m&lang=en, accessed 15 May 2018.
- 5 <http://www.dw.com/en/crime-rate-in-germany-lowest-since-1992-but-seehofer-still-issues-stern-warning/a-43697232>, accessed 15 May 2018.
- 6 https://www.destatis.de/EN/PressServices/Press/pr/2018/03/PE18_115_122.html;jsessionid=D80E4519C7EE6AC70A3B6BF48485845E.InternetLive1, accessed 15 May 2018.