

Germany: Merkel does not stand out but holds

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Introduction

Germany went to the polls on Sunday, May 25 to elect 96 members of the European Parliament, by far the country in Europe that elects most delegates. The 96 members were elected by a pure proportional electoral system, a real novelty for nationwide elections in Germany, where the minimum threshold has always been 5% for the national elections and 3% for the European elections. This change was the result of Constitutional Court's decision last February to eliminate the electoral threshold.

The election campaign

Despite Germany's leading role in Europe and the importance of Europe for Germany, only a quarter of German voters said that they were interested in the European elections during the campaign (<http://www.thelocal.de/20140523>). The main reasons for voters' apathy are to be found in a very sober election campaign and the lack of disagreement among mainstream parties. The *Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union* (CDU/CSU), headed by Angela Merkel and Horst Seehofer, respectively, and the *Social Democratic Party* (SPD), headed by Sigmar Gabriel, govern together in a grand coalition, and although both major parties indicated and supported their own candidates, these were not able to mobilise the electorate. Both candidates for the position of the president of the European Commission, the candidate preferred by the CDU/CSU, Jean-Claude Juncker of the *European People's Party* (EPP), and the candidate preferred by the SPD, Martin Schulz of the *Alliance of Socialists and Democrats* (S&D), found it extremely difficult to find topics on which they disagreed.

This lack of debate and disagreement between the two major parties could have offered a great opportunity to opposition parties to mobilise the electorate.

In addition, the Constitutional Court's decision to switch to a pure proportional system could have given to all the supporters of smaller parties, who did not want to 'waste' their vote (Cox, 1997) during the national elections due to the 5% threshold, the incentive to vote for their preferred party. In fact the legal change translates even less than 1% of votes into one seat. Despite all this however, the expectations for the performance of small extreme right and extreme left parties remained very low during the election campaign. The *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) party was the exception, perhaps the only real novelty of this low-profile European election in Germany. Indeed, it was expected that the AfD, standing for the dissolution of the common currency, would perform better than the last national elections in 2013 but not as strong as first polls had predicted.

The results

The turnout for the elections was 48.1%, almost 5 percentage points more than that in 2009 but far lower than the last national elections when the turnout has been 71.5%. The results confirmed Angela Merkel's party (the CDU) as first party in Germany almost equaling the 2009 result (-0.6 points) but losing approximately 4 percentage points when compared with the national elections in 2013. The CDU thus obtained only 29 seats, 5 less than the last European elections. Taking into account all the European elections, the joint performance of CDU and CSU on May 25 was the worst ever. The CSU, which operates exclusively in Bavaria, received only 5.3% of the votes and lost considerably when compared with the last national elections (-2.1 points) and with the previous European elections (-1.9 points).

The SPD obtained 27.3% of the votes, improving by as much as 6.5 percentage points from the last European elections and greatly reducing the distance from the CDU/CSU, its current partner in government. The Greens lost 1.4 percentage points and as many as three seats when compared with the last European elections; the party gained 10.7% of the votes and 11 seats in total. The far-left party (*Die Linke*) lost slightly in comparison with the previous national and European elections and it got 7.4% of the votes and seven seats.

The AfD, who contested the European elections for the first time 2014, got as much as 7% of the vote and seven seats, which is an increase of 2.3 points compared with its share of votes at the last national elections in 2013. The *Free Democratic Party* (FDP), which adopted quite pro-European positions during the election campaign, obtained only 3.4% of the votes. This is a decline of 7.6 percentage points compared with the last European election in 2009. One might thus conclude that the demise that has already loomed at the last national election in 2013, when the FDP achieved the worst result ever after World War II, continues.

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Table 1. Results of the 2014 European elections – Germany

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)	EPP	30.0	29	-0.6	-5
Christian Social Union (CSU)	EPP	5.3	5	-1.9	-3
Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	S&D	27.3	27	+6.5	+4
Alliance '90/The Greens (Grüne)	G-EFA	10.7	11	-1.4	-3
The Left (Die Linke)	GUE-N-GL	7.4	7	-0.1	-1
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	(forse ECR)	7	7	-	+7
Free Democratic Party (FDP)	ALDE	3.4	3	-7.6	-5
Free Voters (FREIE WÄHLER)		1.5	1	-0.2	+1
Pirates	G-EFA	1.4	1	+0.6	+1
The Animal Protection Party (Tierschutzpartei)		1.2	1	+0.1	+1
Family Party of Germany (FAMILIE)		0.7	1	-0.3	+1
National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)		1	1	-	-
The Party (Die PARTEI)		0.6	1	-	+1
Ecological Democratic Party (ÖDP)		0.6	1	-	+1
Others		1.9	0		
Total		100	96		-
Turnout (%)		48.1		+4.8	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		none			

Source: http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/europawahlen/EU_BUND_14/ergebnisse/bundesergebnisse/

Abbreviations for EP groups: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

In this first German nationwide election without electoral threshold, also some small parties that until now had been excluded from the national parliament (Bundestag) were able to get seats. However, they did not stand out. Germany will send a total of seven delegates to Strasbourg, representing seven

different political parties that have all obtained approximately 1% of the vote. In particular, Germany will send one deputy for the Pirates, one for the far-right party NPD, one for the Party, one for the Animal Protection Party, one for the Ecological Democratic Party, one for the Free Voters, and one for the Family Party of Germany.

Discussion of the results

The AfD is undoubtedly the winner of these European elections in Germany. The Eurosceptic party led by Professor Bernd Lucke during the campaign declared itself against the euro. Professor Lucke in fact has repeatedly stated that they do not want to be part of the Eurosceptic group in Strasbourg but instead they will seek dialogue with the conservative parties. Despite this however, the 7% of the votes cast for the AfD makes a stir in Germany. The result of the AfD clearly indicates to the two mainstream parties, the SPD and the CDU/CSU, that they can no longer ignore the AfD, which might well be able to enter the German parliament in the next elections scheduled to take place in 2017. The AfD has reached the impressive figure of 14.5% in its stronghold, in Pforzheim, Baden-Württemberg. It seems that the AfD managed to obtain the support of disappointed voters of the FDP. In fact, in Pforzheim in 2009, the FDP had collected almost 16% of the votes, but during the latest election the party scored a catastrophic 4.6%. The AfD has probably benefited not only from the weakness of the FDP but also from the bad economic conditions in some areas of the country. In regions such as Brandenburg, where the unemployment rate is comparably high, the AfD has obtained far above the national average of votes.

Merkel's union, the CDU/CSU, obtained 35.3% of the votes, and it remains the largest delegation of Germany in Strasbourg. This delegation is, however, much smaller than it was in 2009, and domestically, this result counts as a setback (or nearly so). A great deal of the losses of Merkel's union can be ascribed to the bad result of the CSU in Bavaria. Here, the CSU recorded a stirring decline of votes going from 48.1% to 40.5%. A good portion of the former CDU/CSU voters seems to have been gained by the SPD and the AfD. Horst Seehofer, the CSU leader, speaks of "great disappointment" in the aftermath of the elections, but he argues that the meager result of the CSU derives mainly from the low turnout (<http://wahl.tagesschau.de/wahlen/2014-05-25-EP-DE/analyse-wanderung.shtml>).

The SPD obtained a good election result compared with the 2009. The increase of 6.5 percentage points has been the largest ever in nationwide elections for the SPD. During the election campaign, the SPD had repeatedly

stressed that a strong result of the SPD would have increased the chances of having a German president of the European Commission (referring to Martin Schulz), and perhaps this has contributed to the good performance of the SPD in this election. Meanwhile, both mainstream parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, will have to deal with the result of the AfD.

The loser of the 2014 elections is, yet again, the FDP. The FDP continues its decline, and it might be that the FDP disappears almost completely from the German political scene in the near future.

Conclusion

Despite Germany's leading role in Europe and the importance of Europe for Germany, few voters were interested in this European election. In addition, the results of the elections in Germany were not characterised by any political earthquake or shock that have instead occurred in many other European countries, France and Britain at the forefront. Indeed, the results in Germany, if on the one hand provide some rumblings of change (a small vote loss for the CDU/CSU, a small comeback of the SPD and new parties entering the political scene), on the other hand, they suggest that the real changes will not happen for several more years.

References

Cox, G. W. (1997). *Making votes count: Strategic coordination in the world's electoral systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

