

## Why the German Election Matters beyond Germany

Frances Cowell

*Whatever happens on 26 September, 2021, Germany's government is likely to be quite different to how it has been these last sixteen years under Angela Merkel's firm hand. Now that she is retiring, the whole world is paying attention, and for good reason.*

Germany is used to coalitions, but the one that emerges this time could be messier than usual. Its final colour and shape will affect all of Europe and the world.

Whatever the combination of centre-right, right, centre-left and left, two things matter: how this new government sees the EU and itself in it, and how strong its mandate is.

We cannot take for granted that the new Chancellor will be as committed to the EU as Ms Merkel, and while a coalition that is hostile to the EU is unlikely, a Chancellor who is luke-warm, or who sees Germany's place in the EU in a purely mercantile context, is entirely conceivable. Also very likely is that the new government's mandate will be weaker than the coalition of centre-right CDU/CSU and centre-left SPD that Ms Merkel has been able to hold together.

Germany is the most populous EU member and, as the biggest net exporter, is also its main creditor member. Creditors need borrowers as much as vice-versa (they cannot lend unless someone is willing to borrow), but in a crisis, this dependency breaks down to the advantage of creditors, as many will recall from the Euro-Greek debt crisis in 2010. The election due in September will determine, among other things, who controls Germany's purse-strings.

Germany's unification in 1990 revived fears of an over-mighty member throwing its weight around in the EU. Merkel, like Kohl before her, largely assuaged those fears. Now, depending on the complexion of the new German government, they could be revived.

Will Germany continue to be a benevolent giant in the EU, working to support and advance the common welfare of Europeans and their neighbours, or will it be driven more openly by self-interest?

In the absence of the UK, the next strongest EU leader-member is Macron. But while he is at least as pro-EU as Merkel and Kohl, he is not as popular as she has been. Also, he is up for re-election in May 2022 and while pollsters think he will win, it is likely to be a close race and his mandate is sure to be weaker than it is now. If that happens, he will be even more reliant on support from Germany.

Partly that is because the EU is facing threats that it has never faced before, and because it is finding its feet geo-politically, exerting ever more soft power abroad and contemplating bigger questions about hard power and its relations with other global powers, not least the US.

Were Germans to elect a coalition that is strongly pro-EU, for example, where the CDU, SPD and or Greens between them can form a government with a strong majority, then there is a good chance of continued support for the EU and its relationship with other global powers.

A German government with a weak mandate, or one that is unenthusiastic about the EU could have profound implications for EU dynamics. To begin with, it will fall on Mr Macron to carry the EU torch. But France is not Germany, and he will look for support from other big members. He can probably count on the current Spanish government, but Sanchez has a weak mandate and faces challenges from the centre-right and the far left, so that support could evaporate very quickly. Draghi in Italy is about as firmly EU as anybody - having saved the euro and, arguably the EU, in 2012 with his “whatever it takes” speech. But his tenure is no more secure than Sanchez’, and there are doubts about how long he wants to stay in the job.

The other big EU member is Poland, pro-EU, but no lover of liberal democracy and the rule of law. A weaker Germany will increase Poland’s leverage in the EU, playing to the interests of leaders like Orban. They will do whatever they can to weaken the rule of law in the EU, while continuing to draw its subsidies. Other net contributors to the EU budget, such as the Dutch and Scandinavians, would soon tire of sending money their way, leading almost certainly to even more tensions.

A Germany that is indifferent or antagonistic to the EU is unlikely, but would have an even more detrimental effect. With uncertain politics in Italy and Spain, Macron would struggle to keep a pro-EU coalition of large members together.

This has implications beyond the EU. Without the strong leadership that the Merkel-Macron duo provides, the EU may find its geo-political credibility under threat. As the US withdraws from its role as global police and standard-bearer of democracy and rule of law, democrats and aspiring democrats everywhere look to the EU for support and leadership.

The EU should provide that leadership, but it can do so only if it has strong support from its members. Whatever happens in Germany on 26 September matters, not just for Germany and the EU, but for democracies everywhere.

*This article was first published on [TheEuropeanNetwork.eu](http://TheEuropeanNetwork.eu) in September, 2021*