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European Parliament elections in Germany.

A commentary on election results.

On May 22-25, 2014, twenty eight member states of the European Union held an election for the 8th term of office of the European Parliament. Germany, the Union's most populous country which voted for 96 of the total 751 members of the European Parliament, held its European election on May 25, having, for the first time ever, abolished its electoral threshold (the so called *Sperrklausel* or exclusion clause) previously set at 5%. In assessing the election results, it is advisable to consider several key considerations such as: 1) whether the abolition of the exclusion clause has affected Germany's representation in the EP and boosted support for small parties; 2) the changes that took place since the 2009 elections, 3) whether Germany has followed the trend seen in its national parliament election of September 22, 2013 of the FDP continuing to lose support and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) climbing in poll ratings; and 4) whether Germans opted for maintaining the current course of its pro-European policies as supported by its major parties.

As of the first European parliamentary election of 1979, the Federal Republic of Germany adopted an electoral threshold of five percent at precisely the level that had for some time applied to elections to Germany's national parliament, the *Bundestag*. The exclusion clause remained in effect until the European Parliament election of June 7, 2009. In 2011, acting at the request of minor political parties, the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany ruled to strike down the five percent exclusion clause in European elections. In June 2013, the *Bundestag* amended its European parliamentary electoral law lowering the threshold from 5% to 3%. The amendment took effect in the early October of 2013 only to be appealed again before the Federal Constitutional Court by smaller parties which complained that the playing field was still uneven.

The Federal Constitutional Court conceded their postulates and ruled, on February 26, 2014, to scrap the exclusion clause. As a consequence, smaller parties which would otherwise stand no chance of exceeding the electoral threshold, gained an opportunity to win seats in the European Parliament. Seven small parties benefited from the change as they received 0.5% support country-wide and won one seat each. The parties are the Free Voters (*Freie Wähler* – FW) with 1.5% support, the Pirate Party Germany (*Piratenpartei Deutschland*): 1.4%, the Human Environment Animal Protection (*Partei Mensch Umwelt Tierschutz*, abbreviated as *Tierschutzpartei*) at 1.2%, the National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD): 1%, the Family Party of Germany (*Familien-Partei Deutschlands* abbreviated as *Familie*): 0.7%, the Ecological Democratic Party (*Ökologisch-Demokratische Partei*, ÖDP): 0.6% and Die PARTEI (an acronym for *Partei für Arbeit, Rechtsstaat, Tierschutz, Elitenförderung und basisdemokratische Initiative*): 0.6%. While Germany did indeed improve MEP representation by lifting the electoral threshold (the members elected to serve in the European Parliament received a total of ca. 98% of the vote), its representation became highly fragmented. Germany's MEPs come from fourteen political parties (with the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union counted separately). Seven of them received single seats. The seven MEPs representing minor parties include one from the extreme rightist National Democratic Party, which had for years opposed the European Union, and one from die PARTEI, a party with a satirical background.

Election campaigns in Germany proceeded rather calmly. After Germany's chief political groupings joined forces in December 2013 to form the Grand Coalition Government, CDU, CSU and SPD leaders avoided direct confrontation. Instead, they sought to reach voters by rapidly delivering on party proposals, as enshrined in the coalition agreement. Chancellor Angela Merkel took particular care to keep the coalition coherent. Nevertheless, as the campaign advanced, friction visibly escalated between the CSU and the SPD. In early May, Markus Ferber, the leading CSU candidate for the European Parliament, attacked Martin Schulz, who topped the SPD list and who is also President of the European Parliament, stressing that while Schulz did indeed come from Germany, he appeared to show more interest in protecting the debt-ridden countries of southern Europe (*Schuldenländern*). Ferber additionally criticized Schulz for having suggested, in response to the October 2013 tragedy off the coast of Lampedusa, that every African who makes it to European soil be welcomed in the European Union. CSU leaders skillfully used SPD's criticism to highlight the leftist profile of their own party in the Grand Coalition. In another highly publicized statement issued on May 19, Foreign Affairs Minister Frank-Walter



Steinmeier sharply rebuked supporters of Russia's policies towards Ukraine who disrupted SPD's electoral rally in Berlin.

Table 1. European Parliament election results in Germany in 2014 and 2009

Party	Election of May 25, 2014		Election on June 7, 2009		Difference in vote in p.p.
	support in %	seats	support in %	seats	
CDU/CSU	35.3	34	37.9	42	-2.6
SPD	27.3	27	20.8	23	6.5
The Greens	10.7	11	12.1	14	-1.4
The Left	7.4	7	7.5	8	-0.1
AfD	7.0	7	-	-	7.0
FDP	3.4	3	11.0	12	-7.6
Other	8.9	7	10.7	-	-1.9
Total	100	96	100	99	

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

The turnout in the European parliamentary election in Germany held on May 25, 2014 was 48.1%, up by just under 4.9 percentage points (p.p.) on 2009. Short of the results accomplished by certain other European countries whose turnouts came close to 50%, Germany ranked slightly above Europe's average which narrowly exceeded 43%. Any further analysis of the results should account for the circumstances under which the election was held. In June 2009, as Europe was about to slump into a global financial crisis, Germany's Angela-Merkel-led Grand Coalition Government was nearing the close of its term. Five years later, the German economy would rise to become a mainstay for other countries of Europe which struggle to cope with the depression. Over the last five months, the country has been ruled by another Angela-Merkel-led Grand Coalition.

The biggest election winners were the Christian Democratic parties which emerged slightly above 35.3% of the vote. The CDU posted the result of 30.0% while the Bavaria-based CSU polled 5.3%. This translates into a 2.6 p.p. drop in support for the Christian Democratic parties compared to 2009. However, the decline was felt mainly by the CSU, this time supported by 5.3% of voters, down from 7.2% in 2009 (the CDU won 30.0% compared to 30.7% in 2009). CSU's glaring support plunge has been precipitated by poor ratings in Bavaria where the CSU was chosen by 40.5% voters (down by 7.5 p.p. on 5 years earlier) and by lower turnout in this federal state (40.8%, down from 42.3% in 2009). The conservative CSU, which is the Grand Coalition's most critical member with respect to



European institutions, has emerged as the biggest loser in Bavaria. Most of its loss can be attributed to the success of the AfD which garnered 8% of the vote in this Bavarian state. This time around, the CSU has failed to reconcile its criticism for European institutions declared in its Bavarian home state with its official support for European policies as shown internationally. The CSU pursued a similar policy in the 1990s when Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber sharply criticized the European Union despite the CSU-affiliated Federal Minister of Finance Theo Waigel firmly advocating the adoption of a common currency. Perhaps the CSU's poorer ratings stemmed from conservative Bavarians' reluctance to see the CSU join a government coalition with the SPD. Another reason could have been disappointment with the populist policies of Horst Seehofer who took responsibility for the CSU's poor performance.

A substantial rise in support compared to previous European Parliament elections was posted by the SPD which received 27.3% of the vote (up by 6.5 p.p.). Note, however, that in 2009 the SPD was in severe crisis, as reflected in the *Bundestag* election of September 27, 2009 (23% support). Notably, SPD's present result is also superior to that achieved by the Social Democrats in the following *Bundestag* election of September 22, 2013 (25.7%). Despite fears from some party critics, their joining of Christian Democratic parties in the government coalition did not undermine support for the SPD. On the contrary, in view of poorer performance by the Christian Democrats (and especially the CSU), a big boost can be expected in the standings of the Sigmar Gabriel-led SPD in the Grand Coalition. Note that the SPD is strongly pro-European.

A major reshuffle took place amongst mid-sized parties. The Green Party (Alliance '90/The Greens) won 10.7% of the vote and, despite a certain decline (by 1.4 p.p.) from the previous election, and managed to solidify its position as Germany's third largest political party. By all appearances, the Greens were quick to recover from the crisis they succumbed to after their failed in the Bundestag election. The Left, in its turn, managed to nearly repeat (7.4%) their performance in the European Parliament election five years earlier. A big winner in the election was the eurosceptic party Alternative for Germany (AfD) which debuted with 7% support. Established in February 2013, the AfD climbed to 4.7% in the national parliamentary election as early as September. The election was its first test in its strife to achieve its primary aspiration of succeeding in the European Parliament election. In its electoral program, the AfD advocated that the European Union be made up of sovereign states and opposed the centralization of power in Brussels. The young party also demanded that EU member states show more accountability for their own economic and fiscal policies and opposed the policy of bailing out indebted eurozone members as pursued by the previous Merkel government with the backing of the majority of Germany's political



establishment. The AfD is also seeking to reinstate the Deutsche Mark. It is opposed to European institutions in their present form rather than the general idea of the European Union. The 7% support for the AfD came at the expense of other parties, primarily the FDP and the CDU/CSU. The big election loser was the liberal FDP, which emerged with only 3.4% of support slipping down farther than any other German political party (7.6 p.p.). This turned out to be FDP's poorest performance in the entire history of European Parliament elections even though this time, with no electoral threshold in place, three of its representatives secured MEP seats. Although the FDP has already exceeded the 5% electoral threshold in European Parliament elections on three prior occasions (in 1984, 1994 and 1999), this was the first time that support for the liberals declined below 4%. Thus, the European parliamentary election has demonstrated that the FDP is severely in crisis. Whether the FDP will make a permanent comeback or turn into a splinter party (*Splitterpartei*) with meager political influence, remains to be seen.

The German news media have reported on the European Parliament election results in their country as having been "as predicted" and "within the foreseen range". They welcomed the increased turnout and commented mainly on AfD's success, stronger support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the losses sustained by the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the abysmally weak performance by the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Nevertheless, the political scene did not change dramatically: the Christian Democrats reasserted their place as Germany's most powerful political grouping with the SPD following closely behind them with considerable distance left between them and the rest of the country's medium-sized parties. One significant change was the FDP being replaced by the eurosceptic AfD which rose to become a major player in German politics. No longer barred by the electoral threshold, seven minor parties managed to win single seats in the European Parliament. This notwithstanding, they failed to drum up additional support. Note, however, that parties claiming to be strictly pro-European won more than three quarters of the vote which shows a general approval for Germany's approach to the European Union among its public.

The statements expressed in this text exclusively reflect the views of its author.

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