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Germany's centre left and the case for optimism

With Europe's political climate still volatile, Germany's federal election remains far from a foregone conclusion

If the pundits are right, Angela Merkel ought to already have the champagne chilling on ice. The outcome of Germany's federal election, scheduled for September 24, will bring her four more years in office and catapult Germany's chancellor of 11 years into the political stratosphere of historical titans such as Helmut Kohl and Konrad Adenauer. Indeed, current polls see Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and her Bavarian sister party at 40 percent with the Social Democrats lagging behind at 24 percent. Just a few weeks ago this seemed improbable. Boosted by an unprecedented increase in public support, in January the Social Democrats and their newly elected leader Martin Schulz had all but closed the gap with Merkel. Now it seems Germany is back on familiar territory.

At the root of Merkel's striking resilience lies widespread reluctance of German voters to opt for radical change. With a world in turmoil, Merkel has been able to present herself as a global "premier league" leader and the last woman standing in a world increasingly run by angry old men. Also her economic performance is, at first glance, impressive. Germany's unemployment rate is at a historical low, the economy is growing and things are going rather well especially in comparison with most other European countries. Thus, unsurprisingly, the grand coalition that has governed Germany for the last four years is rather popular. According to the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* the government's approval rate has remained well above 70 percent since the beginning of the year and a continuation of the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition remains the most popular election outcome for a majority of German voters – followed closely by a coalition of Merkel and the Green party.

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In such a situation campaigning for radical change hardly seems a promising course for the junior partner in government. After all, it is hard to rock the boat, when you are on the

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navigation bridge. Are the Social Democrats expected to rally against their own performance in government and protest against their own co-operation with Christian Democrats in Berlin and in Brussels? This dilemma is aggravated by the fact that more fundamental political alternatives are on the ballot. German voters deeply unhappy with the status quo have not one but three oppositional alternatives to pick from: The liberal Free Democrats, likely to re-enter parliament after a four year absence, the leftwing *Die Linke*, and the rightwing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* – all currently polling at 9 percent.

Even more painful for Social Democrats is Merkel's strategy of avoiding political confrontation at almost all costs. In many ways Merkel is the best social-democratic chancellor the SPD never had. With her progressive stances on issues ranging from climate change, to nuclear power, citizenship laws and migration, Merkel has liberalised the traditionally conservative Christian Democrats in an unprecedented manner – the most recent example being her acceding to a vote on gay marriage in the final session of the Bundestag before the elections. This transformation resembles the Third Way transformation that centre-left parties underwent in the 1990s. However, the modernisation of German conservatism has so far come with only a limited price tag for Merkel. Whereas the Agenda 2010 labour market reforms introduced by the last SPD government under Gerhard Schröder drove many traditional SPD supporters to embrace the more radical *Die Linke*, the conservative camp has remained largely homogenous despite the chancellor's unashamed centrism. The reason: Merkel's Bavarian sister party which has played the conservative bad cop to Merkel's modernisation course. This division of labour from within the conservative camp has kept the bloc intact and the rise of the rightwing populists in check.

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While the social-democratisation of the Christian Democrats has been difficult for many conservative traditionalists to digest, it has been plain poison for Germany's centre left. With a conservative leader, celebrating green energy, open borders and internationalism, one of the last arrows left in the social democratic quiver seems to be social justice.

Clearly, this is an important topic in a country with the largest low-wage

labour market in Europe and increasing wealth inequality. However, at the same time, recent polls show that social justice is of paramount importance only for a majority of the minority. In the wider public, the issue remains outflanked by concerns about migration, integration and security. While a shifting of the debate towards traditional social-democratic concerns would bolster Schulz, such a shift of attention will be difficult to orchestrate.

So is all lost for Germany's centre left? Not quite. In fact, there are three structural reasons that might just prove to be game changers in the coming weeks.

For starters, the SPD is and remains united. Scores of new members have joined since the Schulz takeover, and the party has for once broken with its self-destructive tendency of infighting. Schulz was elected party leader with 100 percent of the vote and a few weeks later presented a detailed election platform that corrected many of the perceived sins of the Agenda-reforms. In another rather stunning show of unity, the election platform was also approved by 100 percent of delegates at the convention in Dortmund – no small feat for a party (in)famous for its pugnacity. The importance of this unity becomes apparent when seen against the unsuccessful candidature of Peer Steinbrück in 2013, who arguably not only failed to win the hearts and minds of German voters but of his own party members as well.

Secondly, if recent elections in Europe and beyond provide one lesson it is the essential impossibility of predicting how voters will actually vote. According to recent polls, 30 percent of Germans are still undecided and many are likely to remain undecided until polling day. This constituency of, as yet, uninspired citizens constitutes a significant reservoir of voters waiting to be tapped by an enthusiastic campaigner, as recently achieved so successfully by Emmanuel Macron in France. Ultimately, the large number of undecided voters underlines the importance of political campaigning and is a factor that could become decisive in the coming weeks when the chancellor and her challenger's campaigns begin in earnest.

Finally, circumstances may change and rain on Merkel's re-election parade. The unexpected riots at the Hamburg G20 summit scheduled to provide a stage of global leadership for Merkel are a case in point. The migration issue personally attributed to Merkel's *Wir schaffen das* ("we can manage" attitude) may or may not escalate, the eurozone could come under renewed pressure, global finances could experience renewed turmoil or relations with Russia could further deteriorate. It is unclear how such events would influence Merkel's run, but it is clear that such

political challenges would have a lasting impact on the campaign. Also, the effect that unexpected mistakes of the office holder could have should not be underestimated in these highly fluid times – as Theresa May has just learned the hard way. After all Merkel is the very embodiment of 'strong and stable'.

While Angela Merkel has ruled Germany for 11 years, recent elections have shown how political moods can shift not in months or weeks but in days. With more than 70 to go until election day it seems far too early for Social Democrats to raise the white flag – and too early for the CDU to pop the champagne.

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