

An American in Berlin: Reflections on the German Federal Elections

Description

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In my twenty years as a scholar of European politics, I have become quite familiar with conventional wisdoms about Germany. Unlike, say, the French, whose politics are said to be existential and profoundly ideological, Germans are viewed as deeply conservative and committed to established ways of doing things, with centrist parties that share a commitment to the status quo. German politics has long been seen as “consensual” and inertial, with decades of shared prosperity intertwined with a centrifugal politics in which little changes and fundamental questions of social and economic order are rarely reconsidered.

This is not what I saw in my week in Berlin in the run-up to the 2021 federal elections, when I saw first-hand how misleading these stereotypes are. I saw an electorate deeply engaged with foundational questions: the state’s commitment to address climate change, public responsibility to address rising economic inequality, the viability of Germany’s export-led, industrial growth model in an era of traumatic climate change, the evolving relationship with the EU, and whether German national identity can be reconciled with immigration. As I walked through Berlin, watching the party rallies and reading political posters from all sides of the ideological spectrum, I saw a city—and a country—alive with possibility and willing to reexamine itself, in a process that seemed at times contested and even acrimonious. As I left Germany the day after the elections, with the coalition-to-come very much up in the air, and with the share of the vote garnered by the SPD and CDU at thirty-year lows, I thought that maybe the French and Germans are not so different after all. I was reminded of the dangers of conventional wisdoms, and the fact that national political and social contracts are always being renegotiated—even in supposedly stable Germany. I very much look forward to seeing how the new politics of possibility evolves.

Date Created

Oktober 18, 2021

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