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■ There will be new coalitions - commentary on German election results in the states of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt

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On March 13, 2016, the three federal states of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt held state parliamentary elections. The debates in their electoral campaigns focused on the crisis resulting from a massive refugee influx into Germany. The refugee crisis set the tone for the electoral strategies adopted by individual political parties. The election outcome surprised many showing a wide rift in the electoral preferences of the residents of the three states. In none of the three federal states did the coalitions succeed in retaining their parliamentary majorities even though the approval rankings of prime ministers and their political parties were not entirely bad (it was rather the smaller coalition partners that suffered painful losses). As a consequence, new ruling coalitions will have to be constructed in each of the three states. The most spectacularly successful of all parties was Alternative for Germany (AfD), a party strongly opposed to Chancellor Angela Merkel's "open door" policy towards migrants.

The Sunday election not only defined the compositions of parliaments and governments in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt. It also indirectly affected the Federal Council or the *Bundesrat*. The governments of the federal states of Germany have the power to appoint Bundesrat members. The three states in question accounted for 14 out of the total of 69 seats in that body. The Federal Council is a powerful institution through which, under art. 50 of the Constitution, "the states collaborate in performing the legislative and administrative tasks

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of the federation and managing the matters of the European Union”. On many issues, by withholding their consent, states may effectively block the legislative initiatives of the federal government that had previously been approved by the Bundestag. Therefore, from the federal government’s viewpoint, the election outcomes in each of the federal states are of critical importance.

One distinctive feature of the German party system is its two-tier structure (which may be described as three-tier if the local level of governance is included). At its core, the structure is comprised of a federal and a state level. The two are tied together closely as national party organizations report to central party authorities, even though they receive a great deal of leeway in their decision-making. Such dual design has its specific implications, one of them being that support for individual parties at the state level may differ widely from the support that the parties receive nationally. This is due to the specific nature of the individual states and specifically to the fact that the party coalitions formed at the state level tend to differ from those set up at the level of the Federation. The March 13 election outcomes fit well into this picture.

Baden-Württemberg

Baden-Württemberg is among the largest and wealthiest of the federal states. Its Stuttgart-based government contributes 6 members to the Bundesrat. Since 1952, elections in Baden-Württemberg had invariably been won by the CDU, which ruled continuously until 2011 (at times in coalition with the FDP). The largest religious community in Baden-Württemberg are Roman Catholics, who account for approximately 35% of the total population and are especially numerous in Baden, where the CDU continues to reign. Nevertheless, in 2011, amidst a debate on the future of nuclear power and the energy changeover prompted by the Japanese tsunami and the Fukushima power plant disaster, the CDU lost a lot of ground and was forced into opposition¹. However, after the Bundestag election of 2013, the CDU’s results were the best across Germany (45.7%) with only its sister party, the CSU, winning a greater share of the vote in Bavaria (49.3%). In the autumn of 2015, as a growing number of refugees began to flood into the country, as difficulties mounted with their placement and accommodation and as crime rates began climbing, some of the CDU supporters grew increasingly disenchanted with Chancellor Merkel’s policy line. This created a drag on the party’s previously high rankings of ca. 40%. Some CDU backers (the majority of whom tend to be conservative) opposed the open door policy and shifted their favors to the AfD. On the other hand, the CDU advocates of opening up to the influx of immigrants took a liking to Prime Minister Winfried Kretschmann who had been in office since 2011 (Alliance ‘90/the Greens). As a practicing Catholic and a “Christian democratic” Green whose party considered him a realist (*Realos*), Kretschmann turned out to be an acceptable choice for some CDU supporters. In view of declines in the approval rankings of his own party, the local CDU leader Guido Wolf followed in the footsteps of his Rhineland-Palatinate

¹ For a broader analysis of the elections in 2011 in the three states in question and their electoral systems (which is not provided in this article), see the earlier work: P. Cichocki, P. Kubiak, *Dynamika niemieckiej opinii publicznej. Pozycja partii politycznych na podstawie sondaży i wyników wyborów do parlamentów krajowych (2011-2012)*, IZ Policy Papers 9, pp. 29-37. Source: http://www.iz.poznan.pl/news/666_pp_nr9internet.pdf (accessed on March 15, 2016).

and Saxony-Anhalt colleagues, distanced himself from the policies of Chancellor Merkel and demanded that the immigration flows be checked. His move not only failed to produce the expected results but also weakened CDU's standing with centrist voters. On the other hand, Chancellor Merkel's prior refugee policy is being supported by the Greens, as repeatedly emphasized by the party's representatives in Baden-Württemberg.

Table 1
Landtag election outcome in Baden-Württemberg in 2011 and 2016.

Party	2011 election		2016 election		Difference in support (in p.p.)
	% of vote	seats	% of vote	seats	
CDU	39.0	60	27.0	42	-12.0
SPD	23.1	35	12.7	19	-10.4
Alliance '90/the Greens	24.2	36	30.3	47	+6.1
FDP	5.3	7	8.3	12	+3.0
Die Linke	2.8	-	2.9	-	+0.1
AfD	-	-	15.1	23	+15.1
Other	5.6	-	3.7	-	-2.9
Total	100	138	100	143	

Election turnout: 2011: 66.2%, 2016: 70.4%.

The victory of the Greens (30.3%) has been a watershed event. For the first time in history, the party won a state election. The big loser of the Sunday election is the CDU. For the first time since the foundation of the state of Baden-Württemberg, the CDU lost an election in that state. It was supported by 27% of the voters (down by 12.0 p.p. on 2011). In fact, the CDU is the party that has lost the most through the migrant crisis. Right across that party runs the most evident rift between the supporters and the opponents of Chancellor Angela Merkel's *Willkommenspolitik*. Undeniably, the local CDU leader Guido Wolf enjoyed less voter confidence than Winfried Kretschmann. The other big loser of the Baden-Württemberg election was the SPD with a mere 12.7% of the vote (down by as much as 10.4 p.p.). As the junior partner in the coalition, the Social Democrats failed to sell their postulates to the general public. Meanwhile, the Alternative for Germany party, which debuted in this election, turned out to be a resounding success. By winning 15.1% of the vote, the AfD immediately lifted itself to the rank of the third strongest political force in Baden-Württemberg. The result is a huge personal success of the party's co-chair Jörg Meuthen, who led the local AfD organization. Alternative for Germany clearly favors stemming migrant inflows into Germany. As such, the AfD has become a true alternative to the other parties, whose positions on the issue are either different or ambiguous. In addition, the AfD has not lost its face in the public eye as opposed to the far rightist NPD. The AfD was especially successful in attracting persons who did not vote in the previous election as well as a large proportion of the other parties' electorates, mainly those of the CDU, who were dissatisfied with the present policies of Angela Merkel's administration. Major gains have also been posted by the FDP, which benefited from the weakening of the CDU and SPD. A weaker CDU and SPD, an absence of an uncontested leading party on the country's political scene and a strong position of the AfD, with which the remaining

parties are now reluctant to conclude a coalition, all suggest that the talks preceding the formation of a new coalition may well be lengthy and grueling.

Rhineland-Palatinate

Neighboring Baden-Württemberg on the north, Rhineland-Palatinate is a mid-sized state which contributes four members to the Bundesrat. The top two parties in Rhineland-Palatinate, which have for years vied for dominance, are the SPD and the CDU. Since the early 1990's, the SPD has been ruling in a coalition with the FDP, either singlehandedly (2006-2011) or, as at the present time, in coalition with Alliance '90/the Greens (since 2011). Since 2013, the office of the Prime Minister of this federal state has been held by Maria-Luise "Malu" Dreyer (of the SPD), who succeeded in gaining the trust of the local community during her three years in power. The party's electoral campaign centered on a clash between the two great rivals: "Malu" Dreyer of the SPD and Julia Klöckner of the CDU. During her campaign, Julia Klöckner (who was also a co-chair of the CDU) distanced herself from Chancellor Angela Merkel's migration policy and called for a stricter stance on migration. She is credited with curbing, at least in part, the cross over of the CDU electorate to the AfD. In a television debate between the leaders, an interesting discussion unfolded regarding which of them is more supportive of Chancellor Merkel: is it the politician at the very top of the Chancellor's own party or one belonging to a coalition partner party with a different profile that espouses a different world outlook?

Table 2
Landtag election outcome in Rhineland-Palatinate in 2011 and 2016.

Party	2011 election		2016 election		Difference in support (in p.p.)
	% of vote	seats	% of vote	seats	
CDU	35.2	41	31.8	35	-3.4
SPD	35.7	42	36.2	39	+0.5
Alliance '90/the Greens	15.4	18	5.3	6	-10.1
FDP	4.2	-	6.2	7	+2.0
Die Linke	3.0	-	2.8	-	-0.2
AfD	-	-	12.6	14	+12.6
Other	6.5	-	5.1	-	-1.4
Total	100	101	100	101	

Election turnout: 2011: 61.8%, 2016: 70.4%.

The winner of the election was the SPD which put much distance between itself and the CDU in the final weeks of the campaign. The Social Democrats received 36.2% of the vote (up by 0.5 p.p. on 2011). Credit for the outcome is due mainly to M.L. Dreyer, who, similarly as Winfried Kretschmann in Baden-Württemberg, enjoys great popularity with the residents of Rhineland-Palatinate. The CDU came second, supported by 31.8% of the voters (down by 3.4 p.p.). In that state too the CDU lost a lot of ground in the final weeks of the campaign, even though they managed to stem the escape of their electorate to the AfD.

The Alternative won 12.6% of the vote, which is more than predicted by pre-election opinion polls. Another winner was the FDP, which returned to the Mainz-based Landtag after a five year break. Meanwhile, the Green party, which ruled in a coalition with the SPD, found it very difficult to exceed the electoral threshold of 5.2% and thus absorbed a great deal of punishment (-10.1 p.p.). Despite the SPD's success, the SPD-Greens government failed to secure a majority in the Landtag, making it necessary for it to form a new coalition.

Saxony-Anhalt

Saxony-Anhalt contributes four members to the Bundesrat. As the state lies in the territory which once belonged to East Germany, the configuration of its political forces differs considerably from that of Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. Much like in the other states of the former East Germany, the election behavior patterns of the local citizens are rather unpredictable. Shifts on the political scene are more common there than in the west of Germany. Extreme and/or anti-establishment parties receive more support, the voters loyalties to their parties are also much weaker than in the former West Germany. Die Linke (formerly PDS), believed to represent eastern Germany's interests, has become well entrenched. Nevertheless, since 2006, power in Magdeburg has been held by the grand CDU-SPD coalition with Prime Minister Reiner Haseloff of the CDU enjoying much popularity with the residents of Saxony-Anhalt. The migrant problem played a crucial role during the election campaign. The local community's fears of the migrants undoubtedly contributed to support for the AfD. Prime Minister Reiner Haseloff is also among the critics of the migration policy of the federal government and demands that migrant inflows be reduced. This position largely reflects the sentiment among the local structures of the CDU as this party's supporters stemming from the former East Germany are among the staunchest critics of Chancellor Angela Merkel's immigration policy within the CDU.

Table 3
Landtag election outcome in Saxony-Anhalt in 2011 and 2016.

Party	2011 election		2016 election		Difference in support (in p.p.)
	% of vote	seats	% of vote	seats	
CDU	32.5	41	29.8	30	-2.7
SPD	21.5	26	10.6	11	-10.9
Alliance '90/the Greens	7.1	9	5.2	5	-1.9
FDP	3.8	-	4.9	-	+1.1
Die Linke	23.7	29	16.3	17	-7.4
AfD	-	-	24.2	24	+24.2
Other	11.4	-	9.0	-	-2.1
Total	100	105	100	87	

Election turnout: 2011: 51.2%, 2016: 61.1%.

The election was won by the CDU which gained 29.8% of the vote (down by 2.7 p.p. on 2011). However, due to the defeat of the SPD (10.6% support, down by 10.1 p.p.

of the vote), the grand coalition failed to retain its majority in the Magdeburg-based Landtag. Alternative for Germany, which received 24.2% of the vote, was a huge success. The AfD's results substantially exceeded pre-election forecasts. Importantly, the fairly radical nature of the national AfD organization may contribute to heating up Landtag debates and preventing coalition talks. Significant losses have been incurred by Die Linke (16.2% of the vote; a 7.4 p.p. drop in approval ratings relative to 2011), which lost to the AfD its status as the country's second strongest political force. Seats in the parliament went to the Alliance '90/the Greens (5.2% of the vote) with the FDP failing to exceed the election threshold. Forming a new coalition amidst the configuration of forces that has emerged in the new Magdeburg-based Landtag may prove to be very difficult amidst polarized moods, impaired capacities of the individual parties to form coalitions and strong tendencies to approve anti-establishment parties.

Possible coalitions

The election outcome has dashed hopes for quick and easy coalition talks. As the government lost the support of the parliamentary majority in each of the three states in question, new coalitions will clearly be needed. The election results also translate into a more fragmented and polarized national party system and more support for the clearly anti-establishment faction AfD. All this makes it very difficult to form governments supported by the majority of the parliament without a number of compromises. New solutions, such as unprecedented coalitions, are also possible.

a) Baden-Württemberg. Perhaps the most reasonable move would be to set up a coalition of the Greens and the CDU, thus replicating the Hessian model with the Greens acting as the senior partner. Guido Wolf, the CDU leader and - in fact - a great loser in the election, is not eager to accept such a solution. Nevertheless, a green-black coalition would receive the support of an overwhelming majority of the Landtag. Prime Minister Winfried Kretschmann enjoys a good reputation in the CDU. The majority of the country's residents would be happy to see him remain in the office of Prime Minister for another term. Guido Wolf, in his turn, has proposed a coalition of the CDU, the SPD and the FDP. Referred to as German for its colors of black-red-and-yellow - or gold - that are reminiscent of the German flag, the coalition should rather be dubbed "the coalition of losers". The liberals have backed it against the wishes of the SPD. Another solution is the modified traffic lights (green, red and yellow) coalition of the Greens, the SPD and the FDP, although the FDP does not support it. Other coalitions (with the AfD) are out of the question.

b) Rhineland-Palatinate is now in need of a whole new coalition. The appointment in Mainz of a grand SPD-CDU coalition of Prime Minister Dreyer would be welcome by the federal government. While such a state government would be strong in the Landtag, the leaders of the two parties disagree widely on migration policy. What is more, Julia Klöckner would have to agree to playing second fiddle in the government. Another realistic solution would be to form the traffic lights coalition (red, yellow and green) of the SPD, the FDP and the Greens. Such a coalition would have a minimal majority in the Landtag (52 of 101 mandates). Other solutions are unlikely due to the limited

coalition-forming capacity of the AfD, and the fact that a CDU-FDP-Greens coalition would fall short of achieving a majority.

c) Saxony-Anhalt is where the circumstances are the most challenging. The previous grand coalition government has lost its majority due to the very strong AfD (24.2%) and the strong Die Linke which had never been considered as a prospective coalition partner of the CDU due to platform discrepancies between the two parties. Forming a stable coalition will therefore be a daunting task. The most likely solution at this time is to form a Kenyan coalition of the CDU, the SPD and the Greens (black-red-and-green, after the colors of the Kenyan flag). This would be a whole new approach, forced in part by the arrival of the widely supported AfD. Electoral arithmetic suggests that the most reasonable approach would be to set up a black-blue coalition of the CDU and the AfD. However, gaps between the two parties and their mutual reluctance to collaborate run very deep. If all attempts to form the coalition fail, it may become necessary to hold another election in Saxony-Anhalt.

Conclusions

1. Similarly as in 2011, the 2016 state election in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt was dominated by a national debate. Five years earlier, the debate concerned the future of nuclear power (and the energy changeover triggered by the Japanese disaster). The debate then was won by the Greens and lost by the CDU-FDP coalition parties holding power at the federal level, and especially the FDP. This time around, the debate on refugees elevated the AfD, sapping the strength of the grand coalition of the CDU and the SPD. The key consideration for the Greens in 2011 and for the AfD in 2016 was whether the national debate would focus on issues of fundamental importance for these parties.

2. The significance of personalities. In the election, party leaders turned out to be more important than the parties themselves. The popularity of the Prime Ministers Winfried Kretschmann in Baden-Württemberg, “Malu” Dreyer in Rhineland-Palatinate and Reiner Haseloff in Saxony-Anhalt, paved the way to victory for their respective parties. All three politicians headed state governments which were backed by the local constituents. On the other hand, the coalition partners: the SPD in Baden-Württemberg, the Greens in Rhineland-Palatinate and the SPD in Saxony-Anhalt, suffered major losses, depriving all three coalitions of their majorities in the Landtags. This may serve as a warning for other junior coalition partners led by widely approved prime ministers. The same applies to the federal level. In 2009, the SPD sustained a defeat running in the election as a junior partner in a grand coalition with the CDU in the first administration of Angela Merkel. In 2013, the FDP, acting as a coalition partner of the CDU and the CSU in the second government of Angela Merkel, failed to enter the Bundestag.

3. The varied election outcomes highlighted the different preferences of the residents of various parts of Germany. Wide gaps could be seen between the results in Saxony-Anhalt and those in the two states in question in south-western Germany. This demonstrates that the party positions vary widely from one state to another depending on their traditions, economic standings and social and religious makeups. Another part of the reason is that, as is commonly believed, “the east [of Germany] votes differently”.

4. A sharp increase in the election turnout in all of the three states, as compared with the 2011 election, needs to be noted. Preliminary estimates show that the non-voters (*Nichtwähler*) in the previous election who cast their votes in 2016, were most likely to vote for the AfD. It was thanks to support from people who chose to go to the polls in the last minute, among other factors, that the AfD performed so well.

5. The real winner of the election is the Alternative for Germany party. In July 2015, the party slipped into a serious crisis when it was abandoned by some of its activists, including its first chairman B. Lucke. At the time, the AfD's 3% approval seriously jeopardized its survival. However, the migrant crisis and the incompetence of the authorities in resolving the immigrant issue allowed the AfD to redefine itself anew. Led by Frauke Petry, the AfD turned to the right, strongly opposing the line adopted by Chancellor Angela Merkel. The AfD managed to strengthen its position even though it remained marginalized by the traditional parties (whose representatives refused to join debates which involved AfD politicians). The AfD's performance, which exceeded the results of earlier polls, came as a nice surprise to AfD leaders. What is significant for the party is that it was not relegated to the role of representing exclusively the interests of the residents of eastern Germany, where it has traditionally enjoyed more support, and that it received a dozen plus percent of the vote in the west. No wonder, therefore, as stated by F. Petry, AfD's chairwoman, immediately upon the announcement of the preliminary election results, since the AfD became an all-German party, other parties have to reckon with it a whole lot more.

6. The migrant crisis and the migration policies pursued by Chancellor Angela Merkel undermined the CDU's popularity in the polls. The CDU lies smack in the middle of the line dividing the supporters and the opponents of receiving refugees. CDU leaders in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt openly distance themselves from the position of Chancellor Merkel. Some of the party's conservative activists, a great number of CDU activists from the former East Germany and the party's youth organization have been ever more vociferous demanding a review of the governmental refugee policy. Some of the activists (coming mainly from the conservative wing of the CDU) are critical of the so called CDU modernization under the leadership of Angela Merkel. They feel threatened by the AfD and stress the need for a substantial debate with the Alternative and a proper recognition of their party. Their fear is that the arrival of the AfD, with its rightist predilections and a program approximating the traditional postulates of the CDU (e.g. with respect to the family policy), may drain the CDU of some of its more conservative supporters.

7. The arrival of the AfD - a strong grouping to the right of the CDU, is highly upsetting to both the CDU and the CSU. The CDU's electoral success in 2013 resulted not as much from the popularity of Chancellor Angela Merkel and the strength of Germany's economy as compared with the crisis-engrossed Eurozone countries but also from weak competition in the center and the right of the German political scene. The FDP was in a crisis while the AfD was only in its infancy. Now, however, the AfD began to take over some of CDU's electorate.

8. A number of reasons have contributed to SPD's poor approval rankings. The Social Democrats who, at the federal level, are a member of a coalition with the CDU, struggle against strong competition coming from the left of the political scene. Its main

competitor on social issues is Die Linke and, on the environmental front, the Greens. The two competing parties attract the most of the electorate of the SPD, which is reluctant to see it in a coalition with the CDU. None of the party's leaders have been able to rise to a position as strong and gain as much social confidence as Chancellor Gerhard Schröder during his time.

9. The poor election results of the CDU and the SPD provide arguments to prove that large people's parties (*Volksparteien*) integrating large social groups are in decline and that the CDU/CSU and SPD will no longer be dominant on the political spectrum. How can anyone speak of the SPD as dominant in Saxony-Anhalt and Baden-Württemberg if it barely exceeded the 10% approval threshold?

10. The election results have revealed a significant trend. The CDU/CSU-SPD coalition is growing increasingly weaker while smaller parties such as the Greens and Die Linke stabilize. Meanwhile, the parties not present in the Bundestag, i.e. the AfD and the FDP, are becoming stronger. The trends contribute to a creeping fragmentation of the German party scene - if such fragmentation continues, the post-2017 system may comprise six parties, none of which will be as powerful in the Bundestag as the CDU / CSU was after the 2013 election.

11. Such continuing fragmentation and polarization stands in the way of forming strong coalitions. Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt will need new coalitions relying on far-reaching compromises between the parties. The new governments made up of parties which may be ideologically distant, will no longer be in a position as strong as that of their predecessors. Also possible are coalitions formed to oppose specific parties (such as the AfD). One such grouping is the Jamaican coalition (against Die Linke) formed in Saarland in 2009 (which fell apart in 2012).

12. From the perspective of the federal government, the election outcome is highly unfavorable. It reveals the weakening of the CDU and the SPD. The authority of Chancellor Angela Merkel and Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) has been impaired, also within their parties. The federal government is faced with the key challenge of resolving the migrant crisis in a way that will prevent the further weakening of coalition parties while cementing the grand coalition. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel have demonstrated they see eye to eye on this issue. Meanwhile, the CSU leader Horst Seehofer has a different view. If the problems caused by the refugee influx exacerbate, the grand coalition may decline, as it did in 2008/2009 when the SPD distanced itself in many aspects from the policies of the government of which it had been a part. The upcoming Bundestag election (September 2017) and state parliamentary elections (two states in September 2016 and three further ones in the spring of 2017) may force the members of the grand coalition to take more radical measures. The March 13, 2016 election sounded a shrill warning to both Chancellor Angela Merkel & Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel as well as their party.

The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

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