

Germany Is Stuck. And There Isn't Anyone Who Can Move It.

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Chancellor Angela Merkel's 16 years in charge of Germany are coming to a close. Just not quite yet.

On Sunday, voters cast their ballots — and the results were profoundly equivocal. No party took more than 26 percent of the vote, the gap between the two biggest parties was minimal and no one made a major advance. The next government is some way off: Weeks, possibly months of coalition negotiations beckon. In the interim, Ms. Merkel will continue to lead the country.

In many ways, it's a surprising result. For large stretches of the campaign, the Green Party and the Christian Democratic Union were the front-runners. But both fell away, their campaigns faltering as their candidates failed to convince voters they were worthy successors. The Social Democratic Party, headed by Olaf Scholz, then appeared to rise in the electorate's esteem. But that, too, faded. There was no decisive victory.

It could have been a fresh start. In the face of a number of pressing challenges, rising inequality, run-down infrastructure and spiraling climate change among them, the election was a chance for the country to chart a better, more equal course for the 21st century. Instead, Germany is stuck. Ms. Merkel may be leaving. Yet the Germany she cultivated — careful, cautious, averse to major change — will carry on as before.

The campaign gave us early clues. Typically, candidates for the highest political office seek to distance themselves as much as possible from incumbents, to demonstrate the superiority of their vision for the country. But in Germany, the main candidates vied to imitate Ms. Merkel's centrist political style. It delivered four successive electoral victories, after all.

Annalena Baerbock, the leader of the Greens, tried to cultivate a Merkel-like image of rigor and expertise. Foiled by a plagiarism scandal, and perhaps by voters' aversion to somebody without government experience, she soon lost her early lead in the campaign and ended taking her party to just 14 percent of the vote.

Armin Laschet, Ms. Merkel's successor as the head of the Christian Democrats, likewise attempted to depict an aura of competence and efficiency. But the effort was undermined by an erratic, error-strewn campaign, encapsulated by his tone-deaf joking while on a visit to flood victims in the summer. In leading the party to 24 percent, he presided over a historically poor performance. He will, however, still try to cobble together a coalition.

Then there's Mr. Scholz. Though the candidate for the Social Democratic Party, he made every effort to associate himself with the outgoing chancellor, offering himself, rather than Mr. Laschet, as the true continuity option. As deputy chancellor and finance minister in Ms. Merkel's administration, the maneuver was an easy one: He even adopted Ms. Merkel's trademark "triangle of power" hand gesture.

It worked, up to a point. But the nearly 26 percent won by his party is not enough to assure Mr. Scholz of the chancellorship.

The convergence among candidates goes beyond political style. After 16 years of rule by Ms. Merkel, the country has settled into a seemingly unshakable status quo. Economically, socially and ecologically, very little is up for change.

First, the economy. With an export economy oriented to international trade — and one, unusual for industrialized countries, with a substantial manufacturing sector — Germany prizes monetary stability above all else. Anything that might affect the country's international competitiveness is ruled out of court.

What's more, the debt brake, a law cemented into the constitution in 2009 that forbids budgetary deficits, puts a hard limit on what's possible: There will be little room for a debt-funded investment program or major infrastructure spending. In this setting, no fundamental restructuring of the economy seems feasible.

Outwardly, at least, the economy is successful. But the economic gains have not been widely shared. Wealth inequality has increased — the richest 1 percent possess nearly [a quarter](#) of all wealth — and Germany has one of the largest low-wage sectors among nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Around [one in five workers](#), close to eight million people, earn less than 11.40 euros, or \$13.36, an hour.

Social discontent, accordingly, is on the rise. There has been a considerable [renewal of strikes](#) over the past 10 years and the term “class society,” previously banished, has returned to public debate. More amorphous anger, finding expression in support for the far-right Alternative for Germany and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, has spread across society. It would take thoroughgoing changes to address the roots of such distemper. None of the major parties appear capable of taking on the task.

Similarly, an ambitious approach is unlikely when it comes to the climate. In large part that's because, for the first time in its postwar history, Germany's government is likely to be formed of three parties in coalition. Led by either the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats, who will seek to form a government without one another, that will include the Greens and the Free Democratic Party.

Though the Greens pledged to “make the impossible possible,” the presence of the Free Democrats — a party of classical liberals and entrepreneurs for whom the market and new technology should solve the climate crisis, not the state — will put a sharp brake on far-reaching policy.

Ironically, given its cautious nature, the campaign played out against a backdrop of multiple crises. The pandemic continues to place enormous strain on the country, NATO suffered a historic defeat in Afghanistan, and floods caused by climate change devastated large swaths of land this summer and claimed nearly 200 lives.

Individually, each problem would be significant. Taken together, they amount to a major confrontation to business as usual. The moment — not least at the European level, where the bloc requires firm leadership — demands boldness.

But that's not going to happen. Instead the new era, locked into consensual politics and tepid policy, is likely to be more of the same.