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## **Merkel's Successive Election Victories: Causes and Challenges**

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On Sept. 24, 2017, the 19<sup>th</sup> Federal Election of Germany<sup>1</sup> was held. The result was that a total of 6 parties won more than 5% of votes each, entering the Federal Parliament to become parliamentary parties. Among them, the Union (black) formed by Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which is led by Merkel, the current Federal Chancellor, and its sibling party Christian Social Union (CSU) won 32.9% of votes; Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD, red) won 20.5% of votes; Alternative for Germany (AFD, blue) won 12.6% of votes; The Free Democratic Party (FDP, yellow) won 10.7% of votes; the Left (red) won 9.2% of votes; the Greens (green) won 8.9% of votes. Merkel, a candidate for Chancellor of the Union Party, which won the highest number of votes, is authorized to form a new cabinet. If the cabinet is successfully formed, Merkel will start her fourth term as Chancellor of the federal grand coalition government, thereby breaking the record of Chancellor Adenauer's term of 14 years and Chancellor Kohl's term of 16 years (1982-1998).

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the Federal Republic of Germany established in 1949; Germany before reunification in 1990 is referred to as West Germany.

Merkel grew up in East Germany without any political experience, but later she took control of German conservative CDU, which can be called the world of men. She has served as German Chancellor for up to 12 years. She is called an “iron lady”, but she actually is irresolute, hesitant and mundane by nature. Her charm is that there is no charm. During her 12 years in power, the political situation in Europe and even the world has seen constant changes and all kinds of crises emerged one after another. Three presidents have been produced in the United States, while four Prime Ministers have been updated in Britain and four presidents have been changed in France. The German female Chancellor, however, is still there, sending a constant and steady message to the world. In a Pew Research Center Poll conducted in June 2017, Merkel topped the list of the world’s “Most Trusted Leaders”, whose way to success could be analyzed from four aspects, namely, the fundamental principles, substance, characteristics and styles of her governance.

First of all, the fundamental principle of Merkel’s governance is to uphold the interest policy of “Germany First”, which was raised 15 years earlier than the “America First” policy raised by Trump. After Merkel came into power in 2005, she listened to suggestions made by Hans-Peter Schwarz, a German conservative leader and former Foreign Affairs Counselor of Prime Minister Kohl, and adhered to the “Germany First” policy, considering patriotism as the highest standard; she approved that Europe still serves important interests of Germany, but the interests of Europe shall submit to the interests of Germany; she emphasized the EU’s “functional” role rather than the lofty ideal of “the mirage of an European quasi-federal country”. In practice, Merkel expressed her position on the financial crisis of the EU shortly after she took office, declaring that the new government is willing to contribute to resolving the crisis. However, it “will do its utmost to defend the interests of Germany and won’t accept excessive financial burden, because our own financial status and problems won’t allow us to do so”. In the face of the European debt crisis which broke out in 2010 and has hitherto been casting influence, Merkel always

opposed the so-called “European debt alliance” and in 2012 she alleged that “as long as I am alive, I will not agree to do so”. Many of her speeches indicate a strong sense of patriotism and national sentiment, full of pride in Germany emerging from the ruins of the World War II and the success of addressing the challenges generated by the reunification. Merkel’s famous saying “We can make it” (“Wir schaffen das”) at the climax of the refugee crisis in 2015 is also an expression of her patriotism and national sentiment.

Secondly, the essence of Merkel’s governance is not only to firmly believe in and abide to the German model of economic and social development — “the social market economy” , but also to promote it to the whole world. This is the foundation and vision of Merkel’s governance of the country, embodying her inheritance of German political continuity.

The German social market economy has shown astonishing continuity since its birth in 1948. Of course, the “social nation” factors in it have over-developed in the past few decades and require deepened reforms to correct the so-called “social inclination”. This embodies another form of continuity. When Merkel was a chairman of the CDU in 2000, she planned the “new social market economy” policy. After taking office in 2005, Merkel made it clear that the social market economy is a spiritual wealth created by Germany and has inspired the minds of people all over the world; it has made Germany achieve tremendous successes and set an example for the rest of the world. Therefore, it must be adhered to. Confronted with the challenges of globalization and the impact of the global financial crisis in 2008, Merkel not only continued to hold high the banner of social market economy, but also intended to promote it to the whole world. In a speech made at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 30, 2009, Merkel mentioned that Germany’s social market economy should become a model for the world and proposed to promote it worldwide, because it helps to overcome the current economic crisis; the social market economy, which brought prosperity to Germany after the World War II, is a third way between free capitalism and the national

economy; in order to cope with the world financial and economic crises, it is necessary to establish a stable financial system of global responsibility, formulate international binding rules, and set up a “World Economic Council” to take charge of supervision following the model of UN Security Council.

Today, Germany has grown from the “European Sick Man” after its reunification to the top power in Europe and the fourth-largest economy worldwide after the United States, China and Japan. Despite the complex and volatile international environment, the German economy still recorded a 1.7% growth in 2016; the unemployment rate reached its lowest level since its reunification in 1990; the actual income of employed workers hit its highest growth rate in more than two decades; and the country’s three-level (federal, federal states and townships) finance and social insurance continued to maintain a income-expenditure balance. The achievement of Germany’s economic and social development model laid a basis for Merkel winning the 2017 election.

Thirdly, Merkel’s governance is characterized by pragmatic diligence and is problem-oriented. In her opinion, solving a problem is like treating a disease: first the condition should be diagnosed and then the suitable remedy should be found. She would never delay with the problems that can be solved immediately; and with regard to those which cannot be solved for the time being, she would state her position clearly to create the proper conditions for future solutions. It seems to be overcritical for people inside or outside of Germany to blame Merkel for lack of strategic vision and planning. So far, Merkel has had to deal with all sorts of crises during her 12-year career as Chancellor. At the beginning of her assumption of the office in 2005, Merkel set about solving the EU financial crisis; she explicitly declared her position on the difficult negotiations on Turkey’s accession to the EU; and made a decisive contribution to resolving the EU constitutional crisis. On the contrary, the EU institutions and their elites just dealt with the ensuing crises in recent years with fatigue and parry. Of course, evaluations on Merkel’s leading role in the crises differ: for

example, in the crisis in Ukraine, Merkel was considered as a “leader”; in the Greek debt crisis, she was criticized as a “hegemon”; in the refugee crisis, she was mocked as the loner who pursued “moral imperialism”. However, in any case, in an age with growing uncertainty, politicians who are earnest, diligent, steady and pragmatic like Merkel are more preferred by people.

Fourthly, Merkel, in dealing with administrative affairs, maintains a calm and low-key, plain and simple attitude; she takes in everything and waits and hits at the right moment to gain dominance over an opponent. Publicly she announces that she takes the middle course. To positively interpret it, it means that Merkel gets along with people in a modest and prudent manner, free from arrogance and rashness. She keeps up with the times, learns and uses the strengths of other parties. For example, she used to advocate nuclear energy strongly because of global warming; however, she shifted her position immediately after the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident occurred in Japan in March, 2011. In terms of social policy, she also absorbs many views from the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The negative interpretation is that she masters in defeating her partners and cooperative Party and will marginalize or even defeat any of her coalition partners in the political battles. Such criticism is too sarcastic. Actually, Merkel’s personal style appropriately fits and complies with Germany’s development of political convergence, which is prominently reflected in the general election of Bundestag. She experienced three general elections after she came into office in 2005. Unlike the thrilling and heart-wrenching general elections in the United States and France, the election makes even the outsiders feel bored. Following the U. S. tradition, television debates for candidates were launched in Germany as well. However, the candidates could never confront each other; instead, they demonstrated inclination of opinion convergence. The general election in 2009 was regarded as a campaign of consensus and the election in 2017 was even more so. It is illogical for the ruling coalition of Alliance Party and SPD to elect their perspective chairmen in the campaign. Failing to highlight its own

characters is the significant reason for SPD's lose in the campaign.

Although CDU under the leadership of Merkel won the general election in 2017, it lost to the voters. 1.3 million CDU voters voted for the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and 1 million voted for Alternative for Germany (AFD), scoring the worst ever percentage of the vote since 1949. In this sense, Merkel's victory is actually a failure. This bitter result is the difficulties in forming a cabinet, making Merkel be dedicated to negotiation on organizing a three-party cabinet. It is another epochal change in addition to the six-party Bundestag in the German politics following the general election in 2017.

Throughout the history, the three-party cabinet has never appeared in Germany since the middle of 1950s. In terms of the digital technology, there are four kinds of combinations for the five parliamentary parties except the hard-right AFD: the combination of two parties "the Black and Red (FDP)" (53.4%), the combination of three parties "the Black, Red (Left Party) and Green" (51%), the combination of three parties "the Black, Red (Left Party) and Yellow" (52.8%) and the three-party Jamaica-Coalition<sup>2</sup> of "the Black, Yellow and Green" (52.5%). However, prior to the campaign, CDU has announced not to talk with AFD and the Left, while SPD said not to form the cabinet with Merkel's CDU after the campaign. Therefore, the combination of CDU, FDP and Greens is the only alternative.

FDP, a minor party, is the true winner of the 2017 general election, who has not only returned to the Bundestag with two-digit approval ratings of 10.7%, but it is also expected to re-join the cabinet to participate in the government. Christian Lindner, the 38-year-old chairman of FDP and his 51-year-old counterpart of Greens, Cem Özdemir, are both in the prime of their life and boast distinctive personal characteristics. They are striving for the two major positions of finance minister and foreign minister for their parties respectively. Although Merkel is sophisticated and experienced, the combination of "left, center and right" across the political spectrum

<sup>2</sup> The national flag of Jamaica has three colors: black, yellow and green, therefore the political combination of these three colors is referred to as Jamaica-Coalition.



indicates that the policy differences among the three parties are hard to patch up. People are waiting to see whether Merkel could overcome various obstacles with her softness, successfully form the cabinet to create a stable and effective coalition government and address huge challenges at home and abroad, particularly those from the domestic far-right parties.

The EU is suffering from the worst ever crisis. How is it to revitalize Europe? This is where German's major strategic interest lies. French President Macron has recently proposed a plan of "reforming Europe" which highlights that Europe must be powerful to realize the target of "being equal with China and the United States". Therefore, he has proposed a cascade of detailed initiatives, such as setting up a common Euro-zone budget, establishing a Euro-zone finance minister, strengthening the cooperation in the areas of defense, anti-terrorism, informatization, ecological conservation, etc., re-planning the policies in transport, housing and industry sectors and so on. He knows clearly the backbone role of his partner Germany, so he determines to work with Germany to rebuild a powerful Europe. It is a crucial issue how Merkel's new coalition government will cooperate with France on reforming and reviving the Europe.

After becoming the president, Trump has taken a series of measures which significantly impacted the structure of the world, geopolitics, European-American alliance and the relationship between Germany and the United States, etc. There are two notable problems about the new-era triangle relations among the US, Germany and China. First, after the new three-party coalition government of "the Black, Yellow and Green" comes to power, the positive trend towards overall development of the Sino-Germany relations will not change, however, the competitive factors in the bilateral relations might stand out. Second, many people believe that Trump and Merkel are at odds over ideas and are in conflict with each other frequently, which will contribute to closer relations between China and Germany. Nevertheless, there still exists another possibility that Trump does not exert pressure on China with regards to the human rights

issues, as his predecessors did, which instead will induce the new German government to intensify its criticism on human rights in China, thus influencing the smooth development of Sino-German relations.

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