



# **Political Studies** Association

## *The European Elections across Continental Europe*

### Media Briefing

**Professor Simon Green (Aston University)**

Phone: 0121 204 3786 / Email: [s.o.green@aston.ac.uk](mailto:s.o.green@aston.ac.uk)

## Germany and the European Elections

Professor Simon Green, Aston University

Mobile: 07788 704586; [s.o.green@aston.ac.uk](mailto:s.o.green@aston.ac.uk)

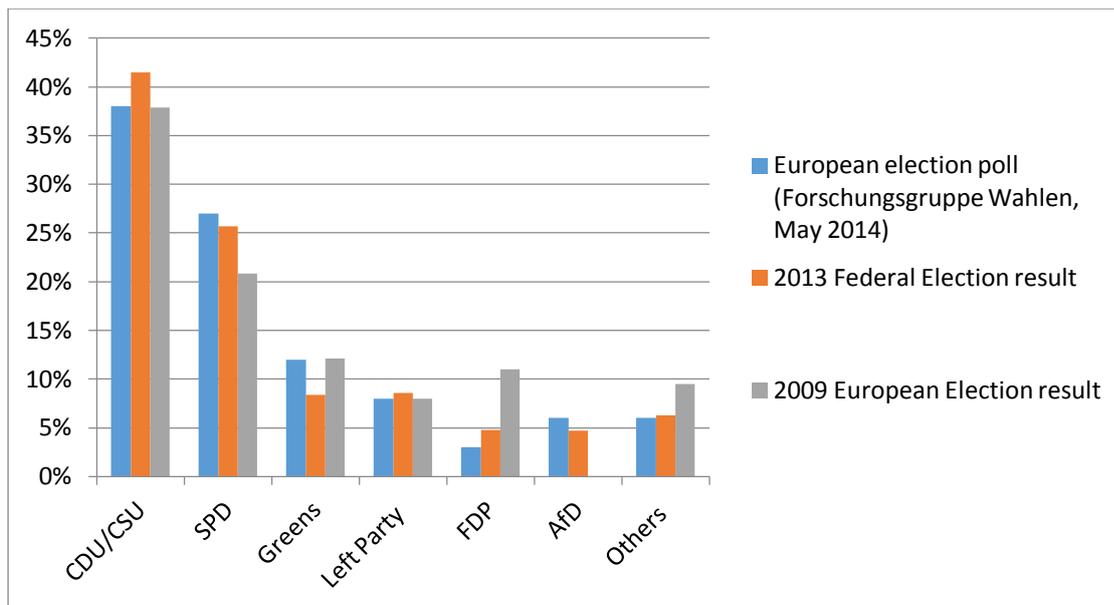
One of the most significant developments in European politics over the past decade has been the evolution of Germany's position. Whereas in the past, Germany was content not to impose its will or agenda on its smaller and less powerful neighbours, this has changed following the global financial crisis. Due both to the resilience of the German economy and the connected fact that Germany has underwritten the various EU bail-out funds which have sprung up in its aftermath, Germany now has a preeminent role in the EU, albeit not one which it has actively sought; this is also contingent on the relative weakness of the other side of the Franco-German partnership which has traditionally been the driving force of European integration.

But regardless of the reasons for it, Germany matters more than ever before in today's EU, and this also applies to the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. Although its allocation of MEPs has dropped slightly from 2009 (from 99 to 96), German MEPs will form the largest single national bloc in both the EPP and PES; indeed, the outgoing (German) president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, is the PES' candidate for Commission President under the new arrangements introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. So Germany's voice will be heard strongly in the next parliament.

### *What will the European Elections mean for Politics in Germany?*

Traditionally, European elections in Germany are, as in most other EU member-states, lower-order elections, with turnout levels in the last three elections around 43-45 per cent. Historically, the campaigns have rarely been exciting affairs, due not least to the fact that all three main parties, the Christian-democrat CDU/CSU, the social-democratic SPD and the liberal FDP, have been fully signed up to the European project. Notably, though, the CDU/CSU has emerged as the winner at every single European election. Coming hot on the heels of the party's sensational result at the 2013 Federal Elections, there is little reason to suspect that the outcome will be any different this time (Figure 1)

Figure 1: The State of the Parties, May 2014



However, the election does provide some important pointers as to the state of the parties domestically, and hence the prospects for Chancellor Angela Merkel as she weighs up whether to bid for a fourth term of office in autumn 2017:

- As a result of a recent ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court, the 5 per cent threshold used at national level in order to qualify for seats will no longer apply at European level. As a result, any party which can score just over 1 per cent of the national vote can expect to gain at least one MEP.
- This is particularly important for the liberal FDP, which traumatically crashed out of the Federal parliament last autumn and is now desperately in need of a good result to rebuild momentum if it is to return to national level politics in 2017. Notably, though, even with no 5 per cent threshold to contend with (n.b. which would apply in 2017), the FDP's vote share looks set to *drop* compared to 2013. This gives an indication of the party's parlous situation and makes it more likely that its demise may be permanent.
- Likewise, this election will mark the first national poll where the Eurosceptic *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has polled above the symbolic 5 per cent mark, a level it missed by a whisker in 2013. It remains to be seen whether the party can sustain itself organisationally, programmatically and in terms of its leadership over the next four years (previous experiences with similar parties suggest this to be unlikely), but if it can, it will pose a major headache for the CDU/CSU. There are also growing similarities between AfD and other right-wing populist parties in other member-states, notably UKIP.

*What does all of this mean for the UK?*

Of course, from the British perspective, Germany's position in the EU is seen as absolutely indispensable to David Cameron's plan to renegotiate elements of the UK's membership of the EU, leading to a referendum in late 2017. The Government will therefore welcome a clear victory for the CDU/CSU (which looks almost certain), as it rightly calculates that the SPD, Angela Merkel's junior coalition partner at national level, will be less inclined to make concessions to the UK's agenda.

However, while there is no doubt that Chancellor Merkel has a strong preference for the UK to remain in the EU (and is probably prepared to sanction some form of compromise on competencies to enable a possible post-2015 Conservative government to claim a degree of success), British policy-makers and commentators have also been systematically overestimating the degree to which Chancellor Merkel will 'go into bat' with other countries on the UK's behalf. This was particularly evident during her recent visit to the UK and her speech to both Houses, which was widely interpreted as a statement of support for the Government's aspirations, when in fact her core message was more non-committal.

The political reality within the CDU/CSU, and indeed the German federal government more broadly, is that there is no appetite to unpick the *acquis communautaire* for the UK's benefit, both because such renegotiations would set a precedent and open the door to similar demands by other member-states, and because of the political costs this would impose on Germany's other partners and because. What this means is that the UK Government will need to do the 'heavy lifting' in terms of a renegotiation itself – a process which cannot start in earnest until after the 2015 General Election and will need to be complete just two years later, in a year where moreover both the German and French governments will seek reelection.