

## Merkel in the middle

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Germany's dominant centrist will face the rise of a populist fringe

Outside Germany the prevailing view is that Angela Merkel, chancellor since 2005 and probably until 2017 or beyond, runs her country as if she were an American or French president. The way to divine the future of Germany and even the entire euro zone, it follows, is to figure out where Mrs Merkel wants to lead. But this is a misperception of German politics, as will become clear in 2014. For Mrs Merkel is successful precisely because she does not lead but rather facilitates the formation of consensus, which in Germany always takes place in the centre.

The search for a stable middle is the salient feature of post-war German political culture. Whereas American politics, say, is often defined by centrifugal tensions, with Republicans and Democrats tugging in opposite directions, German politics is a mash-up of centripetal forces, with all the main parties struggling to occupy the centre. The messy aftermath of Germany's parliamentary election in 2013—as yet unresolved as *The World in 2014* went to press—was an object lesson.

On the one hand, a small majority of Germans voted for centre-right parties. On the other, thanks to Germany's peculiar election laws, a small majority of seats went to the three left parties. Mrs Merkel's own party was the strongest, but her natural coalition partner, a small pro-business party, was ejected from parliament. The upshot was a stalemate between left and right and a need for Mrs Merkel to co-operate with one of the left-of-centre parties.

**Mrs Merkel is largely devoid of ideology, able to tack left or right**

And so, after the customary posturing, everybody meets in the middle again. This is where Mrs Merkel thrives. She is largely devoid of ideology, able to tack left or right as convenient. In her first two terms she inched left for tactical reasons, and with success: the left parties were temporarily pushed out of the centre to their detriment. In 2014 the Green party in particular will reposition itself as a centrist rather than a left party, focused on ecology but without animosity towards business.

### Cooking up a compromise

Germany's answers to the euro crisis and its own problems (including an ageing population and a difficult transition to renewable forms of energy) will be cooked up in the political centre. Many chefs will do the stir-

ring. One is Horst Seehofer, the populist leader of the Bavarian branch of Mrs Merkel's centre-right camp. Others will be leading Social Democrats or Greens. Another will be Hannelore Kraft, the Social Democratic premier of North Rhine-Westphalia, who holds sway in the council of Germany's 16 states. And there are more. The kitchen will be crowded, even if Mrs Merkel greets the patrons at the door.

Mrs Merkel's genius is to keep all these chefs in the kitchen, to keep that kitchen safe, and even to make the cooking look remotely fun. The advantage of the resulting centrist compromises is that politics and policies tend to be moderate. One disadvantage is the astonishing provincialism of German politics.



Centre of attention

The only fundamental change in 2014 comes from a party founded as recently as 2013, the Alternative for Germany. It is openly Eurosceptic, clamouring for an "orderly" dissolution of the euro area, and thus breaks a post-war German taboo. Led by articulate populists, it came within a whisker of being seated in parliament in 2013. In 2014 the Alternative will probably enter the European Parliament, then ride this momentum to more victories in state elections, and perhaps seats in the federal parliament in 2017.

The presence of this new force on the right, a non-centrist alternative as its name implies, will test the German political culture of middling through. Fortunately, Mrs Merkel is ideally suited to lead the defence. Her central task in 2014 is to make the centre hold, lest things fall apart. ■

### Just possibly...

Catalans are formally consulted on independence, and vote to ditch Spain.

Defying sceptics and recent experience, the ambitious privatisation programme in Greece actually takes off.

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### 2014 IN BRIEF

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