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THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Why We're Rooting for Germany's Conservative Chancellor

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By The Editorial Board
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The Alternative for Germany, a far-right political party, is among the world's most extreme major parties. It echoes Nazi messaging. It has ties to President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and it traffics in anti-Muslim and antisemitic language. The party — known as the AfD, an abbreviation of Alternative für Deutschland — is so extreme that Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far right, broke with it.

The AfD is also alarmingly popular. It finished second in this year's parliamentary elections and first among voters younger than 45. As many Germans have become frustrated with their country's direction, especially its

struggling economy and surging immigration, they have blamed the mainstream parties that have been in charge for decades. These voters have

looked for an alternative, and the AfD's very name appeals to their discontent.

For all these reasons, we are rooting for the success of Germany's new chancellor, Friedrich Merz. He is a 69-year-old lawyer who leads Germany's center-right Christian Democrats, the only group to finish ahead of the AfD in the February elections. Mr. Merz has a tough job ahead of him. He sits atop an unwieldy governing coalition that includes the center-left Social Democratic Party, which finished third. The necessity of that grand coalition reflects the AfD's popularity: It won so many votes that neither the center-right nor the center-left could form a government without the other.

The coalition's breadth has the potential to be its undoing. If it cannot agree on policies and slides into dysfunction, it will give voters more reason to reject mainstream parties in favor of the AfD. Mr. Merz already suffered an embarrassing symbolic setback this month when he failed to win enough support in Parliament to become chancellor on the first vote. About 18 members of his 328-member coalition initially voted against him in a secret ballot, and he needed a second vote to win. The reasons for the anonymous protest votes are unknown, but they highlight the ideological tensions within Mr. Merz's coalition.

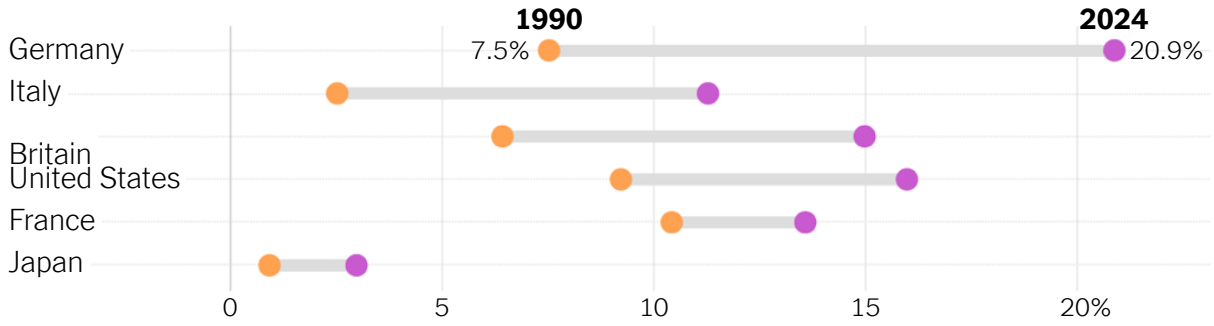
We hope that Germany's elected leaders display a greater understanding of the stakes now that they have taken power. They have a vital opportunity: to show the world how the center-right and center-left can focus on their shared values — above all, support for liberal democracy — and work together to be a bulwark against extremism. Success would offer a model for the rest of Europe, as well as the United States. And success depends on delivering results to German voters. Democracy is already retreating or threatened in much of the world. It would be devastating if the AfD won power in Germany.

Mr. Merz seems to grasp the importance of his chancellorship. He has described it as a last chance for the political establishment to marginalize the AfD. "In the next four years we must solve two big problems for this country: migration and the economy," he said in the campaign's final debate. Otherwise, he added, "we will definitively slide into right-wing populism."

Mr. Merz was correct to list migration as the first problem he was elected to solve. The issue has shaped politics in Germany, as it has in much of Europe, for a straightforward reason. Many political leaders have ignored the wishes of their voters and allowed levels of immigration with little precedent.

The AfD's history underscores this situation. It did not begin as an anti-immigration party. In 2013 a group of conservative economists, business executives and others founded it as a party critical of the European Union and opposed to German subsidies for other countries. Soon after that, however, Germany began admitting huge numbers of migrants, many of them fleeing wars in Syria and Afghanistan. Angela Merkel, then Germany's chancellor (and a longtime rival of Mr. Merz among the Christian Democrats), famously proclaimed, "Wir schaffen das," which translates roughly to "We can manage this." When she made that statement, in 2015, the share of Germany's population born in another country was about 13 percent. Today it is more than 20 percent. By comparison, the foreign-born share in the United States is about 16 percent, up from 13.6 percent when President Joe Biden took office.

Foreign-born share of population



Sources: Rockwool Foundation Berlin; Migration Policy Institute; Migration Observatory; Nippon; U.S. government data

Most Germans never favored such rapid immigration, yet both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats went ahead regardless. "Over the past 15 years, there has consistently been a desire to have stricter regulations on migration, and yet the political parties did not offer that," said Andreas Busch, a political scientist at the University of Göttingen. The AfD filled the political void and was rewarded for it.

Immigration is a fantastically complex subject, and the AfD's demonization of immigrants, like President Trump's, is odious. But politicians can go too far in the other direction — toward open borders — and Ms. Merkel did so, however noble her intentions. The pace of recent migration to Germany has been so high that a backlash was inevitable.

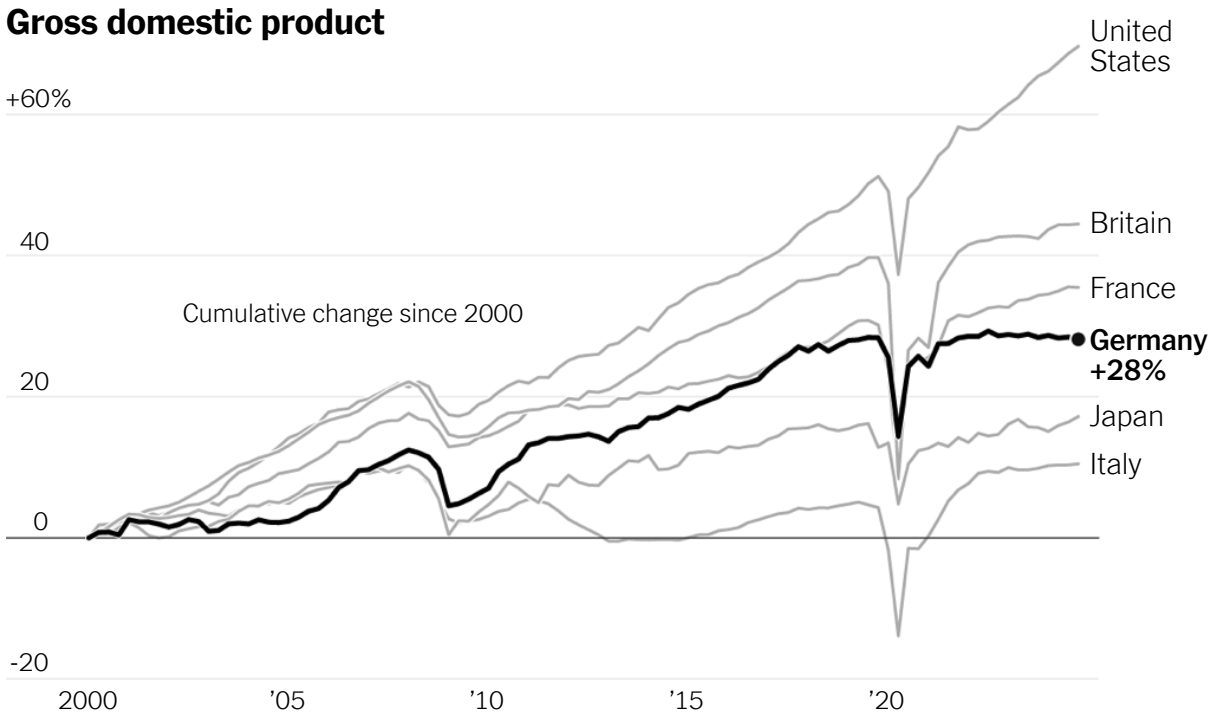
It has strained the country's social services and housing market, particularly in the working-class communities where recent arrivals tend to settle. Most saliently, the system's loopholes have fostered a sense of lawlessness. In the past 12 months, Germany has experienced at least four fatal attacks by migrants who failed to qualify for asylum but nonetheless managed to remain in the country. Among the attacks was one in February in which a 24-year-old man drove a car into a crowd in Munich, injuring dozens of people and killing a 2-year-old girl and her mother.

Mr. Merz won the election partly by promising a more restrictive system, and he has already begun to establish one. On his first day in office, he tightened a Merkel-era policy about who could claim asylum in Germany. In the months ahead, the Merz government will face difficult moral and technocratic questions involving who deserves asylum, how to deport people who do not qualify and how to police Germany's borders in the European Union, which nominally has no internal borders.

The larger picture is clear, though. The biggest favor that Mr. Merz and his governing partners could do for the AfD is to fail to toughen immigration policy and continue to show disdain for public opinion. As the writer David Frum put it, "If liberals insist that only fascists will enforce borders, then

voters will hire fascists to do the job liberals refuse to do."

Mr. Merz's second task may be even more complicated. Not so long ago, Germany's economy was a model among affluent countries, maintaining a healthy manufacturing sector and delivering inclusive income growth. It still has Europe's largest economy, but it has struggled in the 21st century and especially over the past decade.



Note: Adjusted for inflation. • Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve

The core problem is a lack of innovation. Large companies like Volkswagen, BMW and SAP (which makes business software) dominate the German economy, and they have failed to keep pace with nimbler rivals elsewhere. Electric vehicles are an example. The country's consensus-oriented business culture and its thicket of regulations both play a role. "There is an awful lot of resistance to change in Germany," Wolfgang Münchau, the author of the recent book "Kaput: The End of the German Miracle," has said. None of the world's 20 most valuable companies are German.

Mr. Merz has acknowledged the problem. Among other steps, he recently

abandoned his longstanding opposition to larger government debt in the hope of accelerating growth through greater investment. His coalition has agreed to increase spending on infrastructure, information technology, clean energy and the military. The military part is important for two reasons. One, Europe had a new need to defend itself, given Russian aggression and Mr. Trump's isolationist instincts. Two, military programs are so large and technology-heavy that they often produce economic spillovers. Just look at Silicon Valley: The semiconductor industry, the internet and much more have their roots in Pentagon programs.

In the best-case scenario, Germany's recent debt agreement can become a model for the Merz coalition government. The deal included priorities of both the left and the right. Their lingering differences did not prevent the bill from passing.

There will probably be tougher negotiations ahead. But fear can play a useful role in overcoming future disagreements. If the mainstream parties descend into bickering and fail to make tangible progress on Germany's problems, the likely result is ominous: Even more voters will turn to an extremist, hate-filled alternative. Mr. Merz and his governing partners have an opportunity to show that the political establishment can still deliver results. Their success matters for Germany and for liberal democracy.

Source photograph by Bettmann/Getty Images.

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