In February, a political earthquake in the small eastern state of Thuringia sent shockwaves across Germany. After the state-level Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) broke political taboo by collaborating with the populist far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), public outcry erupted throughout the country. German history had forbidden until then any political cooperation between mainstream parties and those on the far right.

As a result of the scandal, major shifts emerged across the German political landscape. Support for the CDU and FDP dropped nationwide, the stability of the ruling grand coalition – between the CDU and Social Democratic Party (SPD) – in Berlin again came into question, and the AfD emerged victorious from the ensuing chaos. Of all subsequent developments, however, none was more impactful than the decision of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s then-heir apparent, to resign as CDU party chairwoman. The move effectively dashed the chancellor’s plans for a smooth and steady transition out of the German political arena. It also signaled an end to Germany’s traditionally center-led political stability and caused widespread concern about the country’s position on the European stage.

Oh, how quickly times can change.

Enter Coronavirus

While the scandal in Thuringia unfolded, a greater challenge was heading to Germany from southern Europe. By late-February, outbreaks of COVID-19 in the states of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia signaled that a nationwide pandemic was imminent. Early in the crisis, Germany’s response was slow and disjointed. The federal nature of the country’s system of government, limitations on the executive to assume emergency powers, and the rapid spread of the virus, forced individual states – and in some cases local communities – to establish and implement their own strategies to mitigate the damage. Germany’s approach at the outset was described as an ineffectual Flickenteppich, or patchwork. It became increasingly clear that Germany needed a strong central force to provide expertise, guidance and support. In typical
Merkel fashion, the chancellor calmly and expertly rose to the occasion.

On March 18, Merkel delivered an unprecedented televised address to the nation. After describing the pandemic as Germany’s greatest challenge since World War II, she called for “common and united action” to combat the spread of the virus. In the weeks following this unifying message, Germany implemented an effective strategy based on increased coordination between the federal and state levels of government, record levels of financial support, widespread testing, clear communication and, above all, a steadfast reliance on scientific expertise. As a result, Germany has effectively stemmed the spread of the virus and has entered a second phase of easing lockdown restrictions. Currently, the number of individuals who recover from the virus each day exceeds the number who contract it.

**Germany’s Political Transformation**

Germany’s competent and effective response to the pandemic has led to significantly increased support for the chancellor and her party. Her approval rating stands at 68%, a 15-percentage point increase from March, and the highest level since July 2017. Key members of her cabinet have also become more popular after strong performances, especially Health Minister Jens Spahn (56%, +5 from March) and Economic Affairs Minister Peter Altmaier (53%, +15 from March). Approval of the Christian Democrats has skyrocketed. The CDU’s role in the Thuringia affair appears to be a distant memory for German voters; national support of the party has increased by 11 percentage points since early February to 40%.

Germany’s other parties have not received similar boosts. Despite increased support for SPD Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (59%, +13 from March) and the grand coalition (currently at an all-time high of 63%), the Social Democrats have not benefited as much as their Christian Democrat partners. Despite a slight uptick in national support at the peak of the pandemic, the SPD has returned to pre-coronavirus levels of around 16%. This is unsurprising, as the party has traditionally been hindered by its inability to distinguish itself in the grand coalition and by an identity crisis stemming from years of internal division.

The laissez-faire FDP has failed to rebound from the Thuringia scandal, and its support has steadily dropped since February. The party recently sought to distinguish itself in the opposition by reversing its support of lockdown restrictions. The move has failed to pay off among voters. Currently, if a general election were held, it is unclear whether the FDP would reach the 5% threshold needed to remain in the Bundestag. This could change, however, depending on the length of time restrictions are in force and the economic impacts of the virus.

The pandemic has also dealt a major blow to the AfD, the main beneficiary of the Thuringia scandal. While the party has traditionally benefited from times of national hardship, the pandemic, unlike the Eurozone and migration crises of the past decade, has unified the country in common cause. The AfD has been unable to distinguish itself in the crisis, and infighting between moderate and radical wings threatens party unity. The AfD has seen its support drop to 8%, the lowest since August 2017. Although the AfD is struggling now, the pandemic’s residual economic impact could provide fertile ground for the party to exploit future hardship.

Of all parties negatively impacted by the virus, the previously trending Greens top the list. Despite experiencing steady gains at the state and local levels over the past few years, support has dropped considerably during the pandemic, at times by 10 percentage points. The health crisis appears to have sidelined most environmental issues for the time being. During the Greens’ recent virtual party convention – the first of its kind – Winfried Kretschmann, prime minister of Baden-Württemberg, called on his colleagues not to make a fuss over the polls. He stated that it is important in the long run to have a compass that points to the future, and that they should be confident moving forward.

**The Saga Continues**

The Thuringia debacle in February caused major shifts in Germany’s political landscape, the result of years of growing political fragmentation, or the shift of voters from the center to the left and right. The COVID-19 outbreak, a national emergency that required strong and unified action, reversed that trend and spurred a return to the political center. While Chancellor Merkel and the CDU are currently riding a wave of national support, it is unclear how long that will last. The “common and unified” status of the German public is undoubtedly starting to fade. Germany has yet to feel the full economic impact of the virus and, as the chancellor has indicated, the crisis is far from over despite the country’s exiting the first phase of the pandemic. As Germany navigates its way through the next challenges of the coronavirus saga, its national politics remain vulnerable to further significant shifts.
Endnotes
8 Ibid.
18 Ibid.