

Merkel wins fourth term but far-right populists make gains

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Angela Merkel has won her fourth term as German chancellor but saw a sharp fall in support for her conservative Christian Democrat-led alliance and advances by the country's far-right populist party.

Her win was marred by her party's worst election result since 1949 and a bigger-than-expected success for her nationalist opponents — the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany. The AfD capitalised on Germany's refugee crisis and will surge into the Bundestag as the first substantial rightwing populist party since the second world war.

Turnout was more than 76 per cent compared with 71.5 per cent in 2013.

Ms Merkel put a brave face on the result, saying she had wanted "a better" outcome but that her CDU bloc remained "the strongest force" and would lead the next government.

AfD supporters were jubilant. Alexander Gauland, a party leader, pledged to "hunt" Ms Merkel in parliament and said: "We will take our people and our country back."

The Social Democrats, Ms Merkel's coalition partner, suffered their worst defeat and said they would go into opposition. Martin Schulz, the SPD leader, said it was "a difficult and bitter day for German social democracy".

Official results published on Monday by the federal returning officer gave Ms Merkel's CDU/CSU bloc 33 per cent of the vote. The Social Democrats won just 20.5 per cent. The AfD secured 12.6 per cent.

Under Germany's election system, the parliament will have 709 members compared with 631 during the last session. The AfD is set for 94 seats.

The chancellor, who will remain at the heart of European affairs, benefited from Germany's strong economy and low unemployment record, as well her role as a cautious global leader in an uncertain world, characterised by crises and surging nationalism, not least in Donald Trump's White House.

But she lost many votes, especially in the former communist east, to the AfD as Germans protested against her decision to keep its borders open for more than 1m asylum seekers in 2015-16.

The populist force, which campaigned by attacking Germany's so-called Islamisation through Muslim migrants, staged noisy protests at Ms Merkel's rallies. It is set to be the third-largest group in the Bundestag.

It also introduces a sharply Eurosceptic element into the German parliament at a time when pro-EU reformers such as France's President Emmanuel Macron are pressing for the country to swing behind further integration in the bloc.

If the SPD sticks by its pledge to go into opposition, Ms Merkel's main coalition option is a more complex three-way tie-up with the Greens and the Free Democrats, a liberal pro-business party returning to parliament after losing all its seats in 2013. Official results gave the FDP 10.7 per cent of the votes and the Green party 8.9 per cent.

Ms Merkel's fourth election win follows the precedents of two other long-serving CDU chancellors, Konrad Adenauer, who rebuilt Germany from postwar ruin, and her mentor Helmut Kohl, who presided over German reunification.

The professional scientist, who grew up in communist East Germany, came to power by beating chancellor Gerhard Schröder of the SPD in 2005 and has held office through a long financial crisis for the eurozone, as well as challenges including conflict in Ukraine and European migration.

Ms Merkel, 63, campaigned on an all-inclusive mother-of-the-nation approach with vague promises of cutting taxes, boosting investment and integrating migrants as well as playing her most appealing suit, continuity.

Mr Schulz, who took over as SPD leader in January, failed to profit from an initial surge of enthusiasm, as he struggled to articulate a clear alternative to the CDU or land a telling blow on the chancellor.

But Ms Merkel's win cannot hide a steady political fragmentation. With the AfD entering parliament and the FDP returning, the number of Bundestag parties rises to seven, leaving the CDU and the SPD, the two parties that have dominated postwar politics, with around just 53 per cent of the vote compared with a combined 90 per cent in their 1970s heyday.

While the AfD has been repeatedly compared to the Nazis by its critics, including SPD leaders, political scientists also see its advance as a sign that Germany is finally moving from the post-Nazi era to a time when a rightwing populist party can function like its counterparts in France, Poland and other EU states.

Mainz University professor Jürgen Falter saw this as a "normalisation" of German politics.