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German Greens: ‘No coalition with Merkel without climate progress’

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Greens will search for common ground with prospective conservative and free market partners, but are adamant their climate priorities must be protected



Neurath power station, Germany, is the second biggest CO2 emitter in Europe (Pic: TelepermM/Wikimedia Commons)

By Benjamin Wehrmann

Leading Green politicians in Germany have said a coalition agreement with Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and the free-market Free Democratic party (FDP) will be contingent on climate policy progress.

With the three parties expected to begin negotiations for a broad left-right coalition in the coming weeks, Greens told Clean Energy Wire that they were optimistic they could find common ground, despite major ideological differences.

Oliver Krischer, vice chairman of the Greens' parliamentary group, said the Greens were determined the coalition talks to form Germany's next government will be a success. He accepted compromises must be found in all policy areas, but stressed the Greens would be particularly adamant over climate and energy policy.

This was the party's electoral campaign focus and was emphasised in a ten-point plan for [Green governance](#), published as a supplement to the party's manifesto. "There will be no coalition agreement without substantial progress in climate protection," Krischer insisted.

"We would be out of our minds if we don't make climate our chief concern once negotiations begin," said Green politician Ingrid Nestle.

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Krischer said the introduction of a carbon price floor and verve for green innovation were issues on which the parties might agree. While Merkel could prove an important ally in pushing climate policies during negotiations.

"Every one of the parties has committed itself to the aims of the Paris climate agreement. That's a good starting point," said Krischer, who also served as his party's climate and energy spokesman.

He pointed to the *energiewende* – the German term for the transition to a low carbon energy system – as common ground with the pro-business FDP, which he called the Greens' "the toughest negotiating partner". Innovation was a focus of the FDP election campaign. The economic liberals also called for introducing a CO2 price as a market-based measure to curb carbon emissions.

"We look at climate protection as something that can foster innovation and strengthen competitiveness, and the parties' different strengths could turn out to be helpful in this respect," Krischer said.

According to Nestle, Merkel – who will remain chancellor after her party won the most seats in September – could be an ally of Green climate protection plans. Merkel not only cultivated her image as the 'climate chancellor' in the past, but shortly before the election promised that her government would "find ways" to still reach Germany's endangered 2020 emissions reduction targets.

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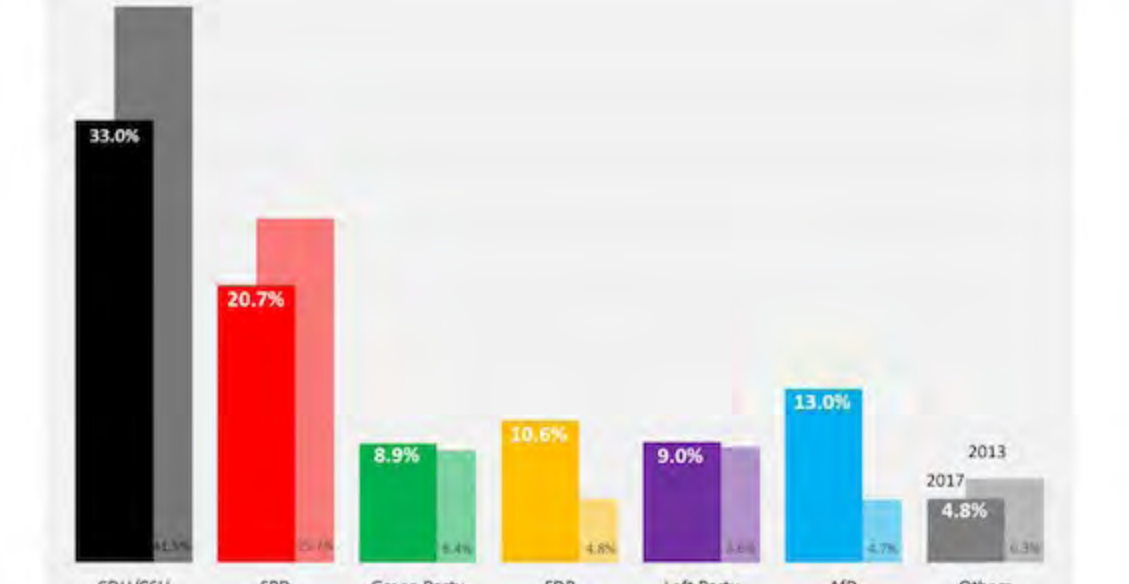
"The 2020 goals – and actually all the other goals that follow – can only be achieved if a coal exit is initiated now," Krischer said. If Merkel makes good on her promise, he said, prominent Green demands to immediately shut down the country's 20 most-polluting coal plants and gradually phase out coal-fired power production over the next decade have a great chance of becoming a reality. A corresponding expansion of renewable energy would then become inevitable, he adds.

But Krischer also points out that both the CDU and FDP backed the continued use of coal power for decades to come in their coalition agreement in the coal-mining state of North Rhine-Westphalia earlier this year.

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Nestle said a coal exit is the only way to still reach the 2020 targets and lamented that Merkel often finds the right words on climate "but backs out of important decisions letting others take over".

Following September's general elections, the Green party could enter the federal government for the first time since 2005. If negotiations are successful, they will be the smallest partner in a 'Jamaica coalition' – named so because the colours of the parties mirror the Caribbean country's green, black and yellow flag.

Merkel announced on Monday that serious coalition talks would begin on 18 October, after regional elections in the state of Lower Saxony have taken place on 15 October. With 393 out of 709 seats in parliament, a Jamaica coalition would have a stable majority.

A Jamaica coalition is seen as the only viable option [after September's election](#). The previous governing coalition between the CDU and the Social Democrats (SPD) has broken down, with both parties saying they would not be renewing their partnership. At a CDU convention on 7 October, Merkel [confirmed](#) that her party will seek coalition talks with the FDP and the Greens.

The Greens' first government participation at the federal level was in 1998, in a coalition with the left-leaning SPD. This "red-green" government initiated several important climate and energy policies that continue to shape German policy to the present day, such as phasing out nuclear power, and funding renewable energy expansion via the renewable energy act (EEG).

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This time, however, things are different. In a Jamaica coalition, the Greens would find themselves at a greater ideological distance from their potential partners. "Nobody in the Green party is particularly excited about a possible Jamaica coalition, and other constellations would have been easier for sure," said Krischer.

The FDP insist on strengthening market-based policies and have criticised the EEG, a cornerstone of Germany's energy transition, which requires consumers to pay for the renewable roll-out via a surcharge on their power bills.

FDP head Christian Lindner recently reiterated his party's demand for a "reasonable energy policy" to cut the cost of the *energiewende*. On climate policy, Lindner said Germany ought to abolish its "unrealistic" national CO2 reduction targets, and align them instead with European standards.

The Bavarian branch of the conservatives that share power with Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU at the federal level, the CSU, would also be a difficult partner for the Greens. CSU transport minister Alexander Dobrindt, who would have preferred a coalition with the FDP but without the Greens, recently mocked the environmentalist party as being "the tofu that has fallen into our meat stew".

For their part, the Greens have criticised Dobrindt for being too subservient to German carmakers in the 'dieselgate' emissions fraud scandal.

"It's clear that we are not going to support policies like those of Alexander Dobrindt," Krischer said. The Greens want to prevent looming driving bans in inner cities as much as anyone, he said, but insisted carmakers' wellbeing must no longer be placed above people's health. "The times of voluntary self-control by the carmakers are over, we need clear rules and authorities that enforce them."

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This awkward marriage of left and right is not unprecedented. A Jamaica coalition would be Germany's first three-camp government on a national level, but the combination has already been established at regional state level, in Germany's northernmost state Schleswig-Holstein.

Green politician Nestle, who was directly involved in forging the regional government in June, concedes the political conditions are different at the federal level. Both the CDU and the FDP regional branches in the wind power state are more dedicated to the energy transition than their parties as a whole.

"What was important in Schleswig-Holstein is that all parties were looking for a compromise that supports everyone else's agenda as much as possible," the energy economist told Clean Energy Wire.

The state's coalition partners did not enter coalition talks with a tit-for-tat approach where a party would have to give up half of its demands to see the other half fulfilled. "It's possible to fulfil, say, 70% of everyone's wishes," Nestle said. "It just depends on the angle you apply to a topic. This often allows everyone to put their mark on a coalition agreement without anyone else losing out."

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