

Ordnung muss nicht sein Developments on the German political scene

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The results of parliamentary elections in seven German federal states, ongoing since early 2011, show the collapse of the existing order on the German political scene, both on a national level and on the level of the individual federal states. So far, the federal states have been governed by one of the catch-all parties¹ – i.e. the Christian Democrats or Social Democrats – in coalitions with smaller partners – the FDP and the Greens, respectively². This year's elections have fully revealed the extent of social transformation in Germany and its impact on voting preferences and the hitherto stable party system in this country. The largest and most popular parties so far – the CDU and the SPD – are losing the voters' confidence and support, whereas the parties associated with protest movements (such as the Greens) are gaining prominence. Moreover, the German political scene is undergoing increasing fragmentation, as new small, local groups are appearing who have no political aspirations at the federal level but who are attractive to voters acting as successful groups of common cause. The changes in the existing balance of power on the German political scene are being sped up by the specific features of the federal system. Elections to the parliaments of the federal states are held at regular intervals which increasingly affects policies on the national level. The key decisions that concern domestic and foreign affairs are made under the pressure of constant election campaigns.

The changes in German society

Over the last 20 years, German society has undergone a profound transformation that has affected people's voting preferences and their approach to politics. This transformation results from demographic changes, an increasing individualisation of German citizens and a growing diversity of groups comprising the middle class.

The structure and standpoints of German society have been affected most by the reunification of the two German states, as a result of which the country's population increased by 18.5 million citizens with a different socialisation. The wave of emigration of a young, educated population from the eastern to western federal states has also resulted in the mixing of various social groups with differing mentalities and outlooks. Germany also owes its social diversity to a growing number of residents of immigrant origin (every fourth person living in Germany is a foreigner or a child/grandchild of a foreign citizen).

¹ A catch-all party (Volkspartei) is a party that represents a wide range of views and is split into factions that represent these views, with numerous members and a broad electoral base made up of people from different social groups.

² The exception to this rule is the participation of the Left Party in ruling coalitions in Berlin (in 2002, as PDS at the time – since 2007 PDS has been part of the Left Party) and Brandenburg (2009).

Another aspect is the aging of the population of Germany. According to estimations made by German demographers, the country's population will have shrunk by 5 million people by 2030.

Demographic factors and processes that are taking place in Germany and worldwide (globalisation, non-traditional forms of work³ becoming widespread) are affecting German society and making it increasingly more individualistic. This leads to the disintegration of traditional circles and common interest groups that had been around for decades, and with whom a large part of German society had identified (workers, the middle class, civil servants, trade unions and others). The individualisation of Germans currently observed is reflected in the behaviour of voters during the Bundestag elections in 2005 and 2009, e.g. in their spontaneous voting decisions, made to suit their interests of the moment and not resulting from their established political views, as had previously been the case⁴. The proportion of

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people who do not participate in national-level elections is also growing – in 2009, 30% of German citizens did not participate in the Bundestag elections, which was 7 percentage points (pp) more than in 2005. The situation is different on the federal states level, where election campaigns revolve around local issues and address potential voters more directly. The turnout in these elections is higher: in the elections to the Baden-Württemberg

parliament in March 2011 it exceeded 66%, which was 12 pp more than 5 years ago⁵. This proves that the political activity of Germans is not fading but is taking a new form. Until recently, this activity was defined as the participation in elections and membership in political parties and trade unions. At the moment, it is more frequently manifested in people's social activity, their involvement in associations, participation in local civic initiatives, etc. What has also become more evident, when compared to previous years, is the readiness of citizens to protest against the initiatives of local politicians which may have a negative impact on a given community, chief among these, infrastructural projects. This trend is best illustrated by the protests against the extension of the railway station in Stuttgart that lasted several months; similar demonstrations regularly take place throughout Germany⁶.

The German middle class is also changing; it now comprises about 60-67% of society, and is defined as the group of people whose households have a combined income ranging from 70 to 150% of an average wage. Before the 1990s, affiliation with one of the groups within the middle class⁷ in practice equalled belonging to the core electorate of a given party. Thus, blue collar workers would vote for the SPD, the urban population for the FDP or the CDU, while farmers would vote for the CDU and the CSU. Educated voters usually voted for the FDP and CDU or CSU. Now the new middle class is comprised of people with higher education who do not occupy managerial positions (such as teachers), freelancers, white-collar workers, service providers, and qualified workers⁸. Ever more often these are morally liberal and socially-sensitive individuals, concerned with protecting the environment and supportive of the idea of the welfare state, though at the same time opposed to its excessive expansion (e.g. too high unemployment benefits).

³ A decreasing number of employment contracts in favour of temporary contracts, specified-purpose contracts, working from home, working part-time.

⁴ According to the poll conducted by the Infratest Dimap institute after the 2009 elections to the Bundestag, 33% of voters made up their minds and chose the party they would vote for just a few days before the election.

⁵ In the elections to the parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate on 28 March 2011 the turnout (over 61%) increased by about 4 pp.

⁶ For example, the demonstration against the extension of Frankfurt airport and protests against the construction of an international airport in Berlin in 2009.

⁷ These groups were defined basing on their household income; according to this definition, manual workers also belong to the middle class and one of its groups described below.

⁸ Sociologists from the German Sinus Sociovision institute divide the contemporary middle class into 8 groups: the Established Conservative milieu, the Socio-ecological milieu, the Movers and Shakers milieu, the Adaptive Pragmatist milieu, the New Middle Class milieu, the Traditional milieu, the Escapist milieu, and the High Achiever milieu. For details see: www.sinus-sociovision.de/en

The twilight of large parties

The described transformation of German society and the lack of any adequate response thereupon by the largest parties, makes these parties – notably the CDU and the SPD – lose their members and voters on a scale unprecedented in Germany (see the Appendix). This process has in turn fuelled internal conflicts within these parties concerning their programme and priorities of action.

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1990s the large parties have been losing their support with each subsequent election, both on the national and federal state level, even in the regions where they had been winning about 50% of all the votes⁹. The experts have begun referring to the twilight of catch-all parties¹⁰. At the moment, the voters who consistently vote for one particular catch-all party comprise as little as 5 to 10% of its electorate. The number of members of these parties has also noticeably decreased, which over the years had been the factor defining their significance on the political scene of Germany; the number of people leaving the parties is constantly increasing. More than half of the members of the catch-all parties are over 60 years old, while the share of members under 30 years old is around 5%. For comparison, in 2007 people under 30 comprised about 13% of all members of the Greens¹¹, and it can be assumed that this share is currently even higher. There are also much fewer people joining the catch-all parties at the moment than the smaller ones, first of all, the Greens (in 2010 the party numbered 4,500 members more than a year earlier).

The federal form of government in Germany is also becoming an increasing challenge for the catch-all parties. The influence of the Bundesrat, which represents federal states, on national-level politics is growing. Whenever the composition of federal state governments corresponds with the composition of the national-level coalition, the Bundesrat only endorses the decisions made by the Bundestag. However, if – as is currently the case – the parties ruling on the national level do not have a majority in the Bundesrat, pushing through laws requires long negotiations and far-reaching compromises. The fear of losing voters in federal states makes the national-level ruling parties reduce their policies to short-term solutions and constant election campaigns. At the same time, the key decisions in the catch-all parties are made by their top leaders, which runs counter to the formerly applied principle of broad debates and consultations with the greatest possible number of members. As a result, various decisions become incomprehensible for the rank-and-file members who raise their objections¹², while voters perceive these parties as conflict-ridden, divided and unable to reach a compromise. This creates a stalemate wherein the politicians who have a vision of the party's reform are being silenced for fear that they will scare off loyal voters, while the outflow of the core electorate is treated as an argument against modernisation of the party's programme and a change of its priorities¹³.

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Back in the 1980s, the stability of the German political scene was based on the existence of two catch-all parties – the CDU (along with its sister party the CSU) and the SPD, who jointly covered over 80% of all votes during elections. The position of these parties seemed so strong, and their voter base so solid, that the emergence of any smaller political parties did not seem a threat. Meanwhile, since the early

⁹ The SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2005, the CSU in Bavaria in 2008, the CDU in Baden-Württemberg in 2011.

¹⁰ Compare e.g.: Franz Walter, *Im Herbst der Volksparteien?*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2009; Franz Decker, Viola Neu, *Handbuch der deutschen Parteien*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2007.

¹¹ More recent data has not been published yet.

¹² An example of such a decision being made by the CSU is the party leader Horst Seehofer's radical change of position on nuclear energy, which had not been consulted with the party. Seehofer, who had been a declared supporter of nuclear energy, became one of Germany's first politicians to call for giving up on nuclear power plants and replacing them with alternative sources of energy. In the case of the SPD, the disputed issue was the package of the German welfare system reforms Agenda 2010, presented by Gerhard Schröder. The 'party base' was not involved in the debate over the controversial reforms which led to a split in the party in 2005 and the establishment of a party called WASG (by the SPD's former deputy chairman Oskar Lafontaine). wo years later WASG merged with the Left Party.

¹³ An example of this is the criticism of Angela Merkel by the conservative faction of the CDU who accuse the Chancellor of neglecting traditional Christian Democrat values (attention for Catholic circles and for the Federation of Expellees, support for traditional division of social roles, etc.).

The middle class as a remedy for the catch-all parties' troubles?

Facing a fall in opinion polls and an outflow of members, the catch-all parties are seeking the broadest possible support within the middle class. Since the German middle class is not a homogeneous group, the parties try to convey a message attractive to the widest audience possible.

The contraction of the core electorate of the large parties is leading to a situation where they begin competing for a similar group of voters – the middle class and voters who are not permanently associated with any of the political groups. In their attempts to canvass the support of the same voters, the large parties abandon or significantly modify their traditional rhetoric and take over the slogans of their political competitors¹⁴. Despite program differences, still present in the party statutes, the parties are moving closer to each other on many issues, which was best exemplified in 2005-2009 by the Grand Coalition government made up of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. This sort of assimilation of the parties, on the one hand, makes it easier to set up a coalition outside their traditional political camps (see e.g. the Grand Coalition, the Christian Democrats' coalition with the Greens, the Social Democrats' coalition with the Liberals), reducing the risk of potential inter-governmental disputes concerning individual policies. On the other hand, coming too close to competing groups carries the risk of losing the party's credibility, as it inevitably entails neglect of the issues held as fundamental, although 'sensitive' for potential coalition partners. This is causing discontent among the core voters, who accuse the party of neglecting its programme basics that determine its identity.

To reach as many potential voters as possible, the leadership of most of the parties attempt to make their message as attractive as possible. The use of new technologies is becoming widespread (e.g. websites with multimedia content, presence on social networking sites)¹⁵,

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the parties also attach great importance to media exposure and prompt reactions to events and the public mood. Greater importance than ever is attached to polls and all sorts of party popularity rankings based on poll results.

However, the efforts made by politicians from the catch-all parties in the attempt to acquire new voters from the middle class

are often counterproductive. The analysis of voters changing parties shows that the large parties (especially the CDU) are able to win part of the electorate of their rivals, especially those who did not participate in previous elections¹⁶. However, it is the small parties who are much more successful in stealing voters from the catch-all parties. Smaller groups are usually in opposition and their programmes are rarely verified in real life, therefore they enjoy greater voter confidence than the catch-all parties who have been in power alternately in different coalitions. This applies primarily to the Greens, but also to the Left Party which gained part of the CDU and even the liberal FDP electorate in the elections to the Baden-Württemberg parliament¹⁷.

¹⁴ See e.g. the policy by Ursula von der Leyen, German minister of family affairs in the Grand Coalition government in 2005-2009, who opted for creating possibilities for women to return to work after childbirth as quickly as possible, and Angela Merkel's environmental policy in the first years after taking power in 2005.

¹⁵ The government spokesman regularly publishes comments on the government's current activity on Twitter.

¹⁶ See e.g. in the elections to the Baden-Württemberg parliament in 2011, the Christian Democrats won 221,000 votes from people who had not participated in previous elections and 66,000 votes from former FDP voters.

¹⁷ Among those who switched to vote for the Left Party, the largest groups were CDU voters (5,000 votes) and FDP voters (3,000 votes). Despite this, the Left Party (due to its traditional weakness in Baden-Württemberg) received only 2.8% of votes and remained outside the federal state parliament.

The boom for small parties and grassroots citizens' movements

The problems of the catch-all parties are fostering the expansion of smaller groups, which take up local issues or those overlooked by major parties. The susceptibility to political radicalism of some sections of society (especially among young people) also works to the advantage of smaller parties. The ones who have gained most recently are the parties located on the left side of the political scene – the Greens and the Left Party.

The crisis of the large parties and the emergence of new social expectations have brought about the fragmentation of German political scene, not only at the level of federal states, where this is a well-known phenomenon, but also at the national level. The parties that are gaining importance are either the newly emerging ones or the existing ones that had not played a significant role in German politics, such as WASG, the Pirate Party and Free Voters. These parties focus on the problems of local communities and try to meet the expectations of voters, as is the case with Free Voters who opt for greater support for families, good access to medical care and the use of renewable sources of energy. Other groups, in turn, raise issues that have been neglected (or acknowledged to a very limited extent) by the remaining parties, such as the problems of the elderly and access to telecommunications services. Thus, the Pirate Party is recruiting its supporters by dealing with the issue of freedom of expression on the Internet¹⁸. A sign of the dissatisfaction of German voters with the activity of the main political actors is their support for radical movements. Anti-immigrant sentiments enjoy relatively high support in Germany¹⁹, as evidenced by an enduring public debate on a controversial book by an SPD politician, Thilo Sarrazin, who referred to the

intellectual potential and diligence of foreigners in an offensive manner. Hence the support for right-wing and anti-immigrant PRO groups (such as Pro Deutschland, Pro NRW, Pro Köln) which focus on opposing the "Islamisation" of Germany and which organised the notorious protests against the construction of a mosque in Cologne in 2007-2008. Leftist ideologies are also gaining supporters, as evidenced by the stable position of the Left

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Party²⁰ which is comprised of many different groups, including the extreme left-wing groups which are seen as anti-system parties and remain under surveillance by the Office for Protection of the Constitution, both on the federal state and national level. Another expression of left-wing sentiments are May Day and anti-globalisation demonstrations, bringing together thousands of participants. The popularity of left-wing views partly explains the declining support for the liberal FDP, which is the only small party not to benefit from the weakness of the catch-all parties. In the case of the FDP, however, the main reasons are the problems of the federal coalition (which the FDP co-forms) and personal disputes.

¹⁸ The Pirate Party, which has existed in Germany since 2006, wins most of its votes in large university towns. It is represented primarily in local government structures – municipalities and county councils. According to the data from February 2011, the party has 15 seats in such bodies across the country. Free Voters have the strongest position in southern federal states: Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. In Baden-Württemberg they are the strongest group in the municipal councils (44% of councillors) and second in the county councils (24% of councillors).

¹⁹ 18% of Germans surveyed in 2010 by the Emnid institute declared they could vote for a party which would be critical of immigrants who refuse to assimilate and which would opt for restricting immigration regulations. For comparison, 22% of Germans declared they would vote for the SPD (survey of June 3, 2011).

²⁰ The Left Party, which was originally considered a marginal protest group, is now represented in most of the federal state parliaments, and in the eastern federal states it is the second most influential political party after the Christian Democrats.

The Greens as the main beneficiary of social changes

The Greens are the party which has benefitted most from both social changes and the problems of large parties. It owes its extraordinarily high popularity mostly to the negative attitude Germans have to nuclear energy, its consistent pacifist rhetoric and finally its 'freshness' after being in opposition for six years. However, its popularity may be temporary. Once the Bundestag adopts the energy strategy which envisages the closure of German nuclear power plants by 2022 (the vote is scheduled for June 30, 2011), the Greens will lose a key element of their founding myth (i.e. opposition to the use of nuclear energy) and an important factor of social support. To maintain this high level of support, the party would have to overhaul its political agenda.

The unprecedented rise in the popularity of the Greens proves that the party has successfully adapted to the transformation of German society. The Greens owe this rise in support not so much to their milder rhetoric or a new political program, as to their intuition and a sense of timing.

The Greens have existed on the German political scene since the 1980s. At the moment, they are members of ruling coalitions in 6 out of 16 federal state governments²¹, and in 1998-2005 they co-formed the national-level government with the SPD. Yet until recently, they were perceived chiefly as a party of environmentalists and pacifists whose entire program boiled down to the opposition to nuclear energy and the defence of minority rights.

The Greens were considered a protest party, which contested the traditional ways of doing politics, yet was unable to offer a feasible alternative. The party itself and its perception have begun to change since it formed a national-level coalition with the SPD in 1998. The need to make compromise decisions – such as the Bundeswehr's participation in the NATO air strikes in Kosovo in 1999 and the gradual closing of nuclear power plants in 2002 – forced the Greens to ease their strict programme. Gradually they became a party that was attractive not only to left-wing voters, but also to the wider electorate. Along with the social changes and decreasing interest in the catch-all parties, the evolution of the Greens has contributed to their increasing attractiveness as a potential coalition partner for Germany's biggest parties²².

The unprecedented rise in the popularity of the Greens, noted since mid-2010, proves that the party has successfully adapted to the transformation of German society. The Greens owe this rise in support not so much to their milder rhetoric or a new political program, as to their excellent intuition concerning public sentiment and a sense of timing. The aforementioned protests against the extension of the railway station in Stuttgart in the summer of 2010 (where environmental issues played a significant role) marked the increase in the party's poll showings. This favourable trend was reinforced by public concern about the nuclear power plant accident in Japan and the widespread opposition to the further use of nuclear energy in Germany. In the issue of climate protection the Greens are considered to be a genuine and consistent party and enjoy great public confidence.

Also crucial in the growing popularity of the Greens is the specific structure of the party, which differs from the traditional structure of German parties: it has two chairs, gender parity, it is open to young people and persons of immigrant origin²³. Another asset of the Greens is their 'freshness' – despite thirty years of existence, the party has not been the main coalition partner in any of the federal state governments, and is therefore linked

²¹ In Baden-Württemberg, Bremen, Hamburg, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia.

²² Before the exacerbation of the situation in Stuttgart, the Greens were even named as a potential coalition partner of the CDU in Baden-Württemberg.

²³ One of the chairs of the party is Cem Özdemir, a politician of Turkish origin.

to the hope of initiating a significant change in the policy of ruling coalitions. Six years of opposition activity since the end of the coalition of the SPD and the Greens in Berlin have reinforced the party's image as a fresh, uncompromising force laden with new ideas. However, such a rapid growth in popularity carries the risk of an equally rapid loss of support if the election promises are not kept. This was the case with the FDP, which won a record-high support (14.6%) in the elections to the Bundestag in 2009, due to its previous activity as the parliamentary opposition and due to the expectations that the FDP had excellent economic expertise. At the moment, the FDP has as little as 5% of the vote. The decision by the federal government to close all German nuclear power plants by 2022 may cause a serious crisis for the Greens, who would lose one of their crucial demands which has been so appealing to voters from all social groups.

Conclusions

1. The German political scene will still be dominated by the two largest parties; however, their supremacy will be eroding. The catch-all parties, each of whom has so far gained more than 30% of votes in the elections, may have difficulties obtaining the same result in future and will face the need to form a coalition made up of three or more parties. It will reinforce the process of convergence among the parties, but on the other hand it will make it more difficult to reach a common position on controversial issues that might displease the core electorate of a given party.
2. The German party landscape is likely to become more diverse, and small parties may surprisingly become equal partners to the catch-all parties, as is already the case with the Greens. New local initiatives will have an increasing impact on the national-level policy. By using the issues which currently draw the attention of the general public, the small parties have the chance to seriously weaken the position of the large parties or to influence their decisions.
3. The most likely scenario is the strengthening of the position of the Bundesrat – the representation of the federal states in Berlin – which has a say in legislative issues concerning the federal states (including financial issues). In a situation where the political composition of the Bundesrat is different than that of the national coalition, the decision-making process may be significantly prolonged, and projects proposed by the government may even be blocked. Therefore, for the sake of keeping the federal state governments, the decisions made on the national level may pass over the Bundesrat²⁴ and controversial reforms may be postponed until after the elections²⁵.
4. German domestic politics have an increasing impact on the country's foreign and security policy. Calculations ahead of the federal state elections affect Germany's decisions taken at the level of the European Union and other international organisations. An example of this is Foreign Affairs Minister Guido Westerwelle's decision to abstain during the vote on Resolution 1973 of the UN Security Council on Libya. Another illustration of this trend is Germany's tentative attitude towards the euro zone rescue strategy. Showing the lack of a clearly defined stance, Germany is becoming a less predictable partner for its allies. This trend will be reinforced by the fact that the importance of the Bundesrat is likely to grow, and the decisions within national-level coalitions will have to be reached by a greater number of parties than ever before. This will make Germany's international decisions even more dependent on the domestic political situation.

²⁴ As happened in the case of the energy strategy adopted by the federal German government in the autumn of 2010 – it was not put to a vote in the Bundesrat as the coalition of the CDU, CSU and FDP had no majority in that body.

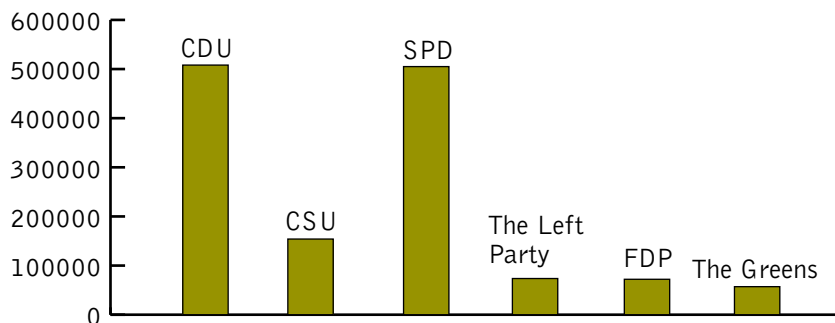
²⁵ One example of this was the decision to put a hold on nuclear energy before the elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate and the postponement of the decision concerning the aid pact for Greece before the elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2010.

APPENDIX

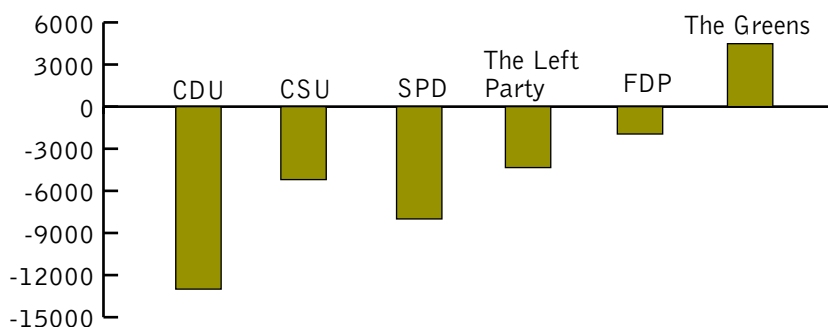
The results of the Bundestag elections

	1983	1994	2009
CDU/CSU	48.79%	41.43%	33.80%
SPD	38.18%	36.39%	23.03%
FDP	6.95%	6.92%	14.56%
The Greens	5.57%	7.27%	10.71%
The Left Party (PDS in 1994)	-	4.39%	11.89%

The number of party members represented in Bundestag; data for 2010



Change in the number of members compared with 2009



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