

Green is the New Normal in German Politics

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The rise of the Greens is the big story of German politics. Once a smaller force, the party now leads the progressive field and is aspiring to head up the next federal government, with elections scheduled for 2021. Roderick Kefferpütz analyses the reasons behind their momentum, tracing recent Green success to the prominence of climate issues, effective party management, and, most importantly, the party's development of a forward-looking vision capable of speaking to today's society.

“Green is the new black.” That was the headline that *Foreign Policy Magazine* ran to cover the success of the German Greens in 2011. Back then, the party was experiencing a historic surge. Polls were putting it at 28 per cent. The German press christened it the new people's party (“*die neue Volkspartei*”), and pundits argued for the need for a Green chancellor candidate in the 2013 election.

But the hype proved short-lived. Six months later, the Greens' polling success had halved to 14 per cent. By the time of the 2013 federal elections, the Greens were back in single digits, gaining a disappointing 8.4 per cent. The following years saw support remain at similar levels, 8.9 per cent in the 2017 federal election.

Now the tide has turned again. The Green wave that hit this year's European elections shook German politics. With 20.5 per cent, the Greens surpassed the Social Democrats (SPD), becoming the second strongest party behind the Christian Democrats (CDU). In the European Parliament, Germany's 21 Green MEPs now make up one of the largest national party delegations.

Since this electoral triumph, support for the Greens has continued to rise. Green membership in Germany has reached 90 000, a historic high, and the Greens scored their best-ever results in the latest regional elections in the eastern German *Länder* of Brandenburg and Saxony. The Greens and the Conservatives are neck and neck. In June 2019, the Greens were the leading party in the polls with 27 per cent, followed by the CDU at 25 per cent. While the numbers have recently inversed, the Greens remain strong and have displaced the Social Democrats as leaders of the progressive camp.

This new state of play begs many questions. How sustainable is this trajectory? Is this simply a case of 2011 redux, or are we seeing a fundamental realignment of the political landscape? What are the drivers behind this shake-up? And is this shift down to the strength of the Greens or rather the weakness of the other parties?

Anatomy of the Green wave

The surge in support for the German Greens took off shortly after the 2017 federal election. As the far-right AfD party (which scored a worryingly high 12.6 per cent) was excluded from coalition talks, only two governing constellations were arithmetically possible: yet another grand coalition between the Conservatives and a much-diminished Social Democrats, or a so-called Jamaica coalition, named after the colours of the Jamaican flag, which would bring together the Conservatives, the Liberals, and the Greens. Having suffered a historically poor result, the Social Democrats (scoring 20.5 per cent in the election compared to a high of over 40 per cent in their heyday)

immediately announced their intention to lead the opposition in the German Bundestag, leaving no option on the table other than Jamaica coalition talks.

These talks were a watershed moment for the Greens. First, it brought the party together. A negotiating team of 14 Green politicians was created which successfully represented the party's membership and its broad spectrum of political constituencies. Second, the Greens adopted a pragmatic, reasonable approach to the negotiations, boosting their appeal. They fought hard for their programme but were also willing to compromise when necessary.^[1] This was in stark contrast to the Liberals who earned much criticism for abruptly walking out of the coalition negotiations.

This chain of events sparked a new dynamic. Ordinary people began to realise that the Greens have come a long way from their anti-establishment beginnings to become a responsible political actor. The German Greens have also shown that they can govern. At the time of writing, they are in government in nine Länder regions in coalitions ranging from green-black in Baden-Württemberg, where the Greens are the leading governing party with the CDU as a junior partner, to black-green, red-green, red-red-green, black-red-green, red-yellow-green, and black-yellow-green.

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This new dynamic continued with a change in the party's internal structures. New leaders were elected in Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock. Both are experienced, charismatic politicians, but they are new to the federal scene and embody a younger, more modern generation.

Both chairs have made efforts to transcend the traditional cleavage within the party between the *Fundi* (left-wing/eco-socialist) and *Realo* ('pragmatic realist') wings. They have ended to duplicate office structures – with each party co-chair representing either the *Fundis* or the *Realos* and running their own offices – and instead used the resources to strengthen the think-tank capacity of the party, hiring a range of policy advisors. This has strengthened the intellectual and policy capabilities of the leadership. And they have used this to good effect, publishing new policy papers which have influenced German public discourse on issues such as social security.

The change in public discourse and media coverage has also worked in favour of the Greens. Sustainability issues have become big news. Over the past months, climate change – from discussions on a carbon tax to forest fires in Brazil – has been a headline issue, largely thanks to the Fridays for Future climate protesters. In a number of polls and surveys, more than 40 per cent of respondents replied that climate change is the most pressing issue of our time, displacing immigration.

The restructuring of the political landscape

The German Green Party has made the best of a fortuitous situation. But the new political developments in Germany go much deeper than this. The political landscape is in the grips of a fundamental restructuring. For other EU countries, this is nothing new. The old, established parties have been gradually losing support, with new parties emerging and challenging the status quo. In France, for example, the traditional balance has been smashed away with the more than 100-year old *Parti socialiste* sliding into irrelevance, while in Italy the Five Star Movement, founded in 2009, became the largest party in the Italian Parliament in the 2018 election.

Germany has seen a similar trend; it has just developed more gradually. Back in the 1970s, the *Volksparteien* – the CDU and the SPD – would together take 90 per cent of the vote. Only three parties were represented in the Bundestag. Fast forward to 2019 and their share has shrunk to around 40 per cent, with the number of political parties in the Bundestag having doubled to six.

The binding power that the *Volksparteien* held over large swathes of the electorate has dwindled. [2] The *Volksparteien* can no longer represent the *Volk* because the *Volk* is no longer the same as it was back in the 1970s and 1980s. The 20th century was the mass age, defined by mass production and consumption, mass parties and politics. But the 21st century is the individual age. Society has become individualised and more diverse. As Dr Reckwitz highlights in *The Society of Singularities (Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten)*, “late modernity celebrates the singular.”

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As German sociologist [Armin Nassehi notes](#), the classical *Volksparteien* used to stand for one of two camps: “Capital and labour, Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. That was a stable distinction. Today you can’t build a *Volkspartei* on that anymore.” As interests, positions, and opinions within society diverge, the *Volksparteien* struggle to cover a broadening spectrum.

The CDU and the SPD have failed to understand the transformation that has gripped society. As a result, they have not been able to articulate a narrative that brings together society’s disparate currents, a narrative that speaks to the individual and brings them into a collective. Robert Habeck spoke of that challenge in a [Green European Journal interview back in 2017](#). “Politics is lagging behind...we have to find a language, a form of politics, that doesn’t try to reverse the degree of individualisation people have already long had in their lives, but accepts it while bringing it into a new form of collectivity.” The CDU and SPD lack this vision for the future and are mired in internal conflict. The SPD is still grappling with the Hartz IV social reforms it passed in 2003, which made it more difficult for people to claim unemployment benefits, and the CDU remains split over immigration.

From a binary to a complementary political logic

The former big two have also lost their way because of their tendency to define themselves in opposition to each other. It is hard to keep up a binary system, notionally capital against labour, when being in governing together is the norm rather than the exception (2005-2009, 2013-2017, and 2017 onwards). A terrible thing has befallen these parties – they have been deprived of their classical enemy. [3]

It is certainly questionable whether there is a place at all in the 21st century for parties that define themselves according to a binary logic. If the 21st century is the ‘individual age’, then the right approach is not a binary logic, that defines itself in opposition to something, but a complementary logic that connects differences. Such a logic builds bridges between individuals and interest groups – between the young and the old, between urban and rural interests, between immigrants and non-immigrants, between those who welcome societal changes and those that are wary, between the interests of economy and ecology. The future belongs to a politics that bridges divides and solves contradictions.

A quantum party

The German Greens have understood this and have started to pursue such an approach. They have established an

economic advisory council that includes Germany's top CEOs to discuss how to bridge economic and environmental interests. When it comes to migration and refugee policy the party's keywords are 'humanity' and 'order' – 'humanity' for taking in refugees from war-plagued regions, and 'order' for sending back those who don't fulfil the necessary criteria and are rather economic migrants. In the field of economic policy, they have tried to bridge the divide between saving and investing, publishing a position paper in which they support limiting public debt but also want to reform the German debt brake to allow for more investment.

Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck have labelled this new Green approach '*radical realism*'. Futurologist Daniel Dettling has similarly described the German Greens as a new type of Volkspartei, a future party (*Zukunftspartei*) that brings opposites together: diversity and *Heimat*, security and freedom, economy and ecology. In this context, the Greens are becoming a kind of quantum party. Whereas traditional computers store and calculate via binary digits, which can only be either 0 or 1, quantum computers run on quantum bits, qubits, which can be in a superposition of both. Peter Unfried, a renowned journalist for the left-leaning newspaper *die tageszeitung*, has similarly discussed how the German Greens have evolved from being a party for "minorities... to being a party for the big picture."^[4]

*Is society ready for such a balancing approach or will the
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The German Greens have also enjoyed success at appealing to different political groups. Robert Habeck speaks to many left-leaning voters, while Winfried Kretschmann, the Green Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg who argues for a new kind of conservatism, appeals to more conservative voters. The fact that different political camps are attracted to the Green message highlights how far environmentalism has become its own system of ideas. In this context, as highlighted by Reinhard Olschanski, Greens now embody modernity's fourth political idea – environmentalism – next to liberalism, conservatism, and socialism.

But it is not only the Greens that have changed, society has too. As awareness of sustainability issues has risen, both sides have come closer to each other. While the Greens have often been portrayed as being in opposition to mainstream society, they have come to increasingly resemble each other. The German Greens have become more mainstream, and the mainstream has become more Green. Peter Unfried notes how the Greens have become a party "that ordinary people can vote for" while Robert Habeck claims that "Green is the new normal".

In this context, the Greens are tapping much more into the zeitgeist than other parties. Unsurprisingly, their largest group of voters hails from the younger generations. In the 2019 European elections, 34 per cent of the age group under 25 voted for the German Greens. In fact, among the under 60s, the Greens received the highest share of the vote compared to other parties.

Challenges ahead

It seems unlikely that the current upheaval in German politics and the accompanying 'Green hype' is just a temporary phenomenon. Instead, it seems that the Greens are giving a much needed direction in a time of uncertainty. They have taken on the leadership of the progressive camp and are now considered as responsible agents of change – with that comes responsibility and new challenges.

The German Greens are taking a unique position by pursuing a complementary political logic that tries to bridge divides and solve contradictions. The question is – can they keep up that approach and will it succeed, or will the Greens end up being caught up in and crushed by the multiple contradictions? Is society ready for such a balancing

approach or will the Greens make everybody unhappy? Which policies suit this complementary political logic? It is easier to advance a general political approach than it is to make policy recommendations affecting people's interests.

This last point is particularly relevant to the upcoming 2021 federal election. Should the Greens make it into government, expectations will be incredibly high. Meeting them might be difficult in a coalition where the partners might block progressive change. That could lead to a situation where some Green voters might eventually ask whether the party has lost too much of its colour.

Political change also affects how political parties cooperate. There used to be a clear left-right divide: the CDU/CSU would try to form a majority with the Liberals, and the SPD with the Greens. But that binary system no longer works. Germany may well be entering a phase in which a range of similarly polling, mid-sized parties will require new forms of coalition such as Jamaica (CDU/CSU, Greens and Liberals) or Kenya (CDU/CSU, Greens and SPD). We could be witnessing the 'dutchification' of the German political system, whereby diverse governing coalitions become the norm.

In such a setting, parties will have to be open for new thinking, approaches, and partners. That will require building bridges, compromise, and responsibility – the very approach currently embodied by the German Greens.

Footnotes

[1] For example, the Greens were willing to give up their target of banning the sale of internal combustion engine cars in Germany by 2030.

[2] In German political science, the term '*Volksparteien*' (people's parties) is used to refer to political parties which, in principle, are open to members (and voters) from all social strata and generations, and with diverse worldviews.

[3] Paraphrasing a quote from Georgi Arbatov, Soviet foreign policy *eminence grise*, when he described the state of Soviet-US relations in 1988: "We are going to do a terrible thing to you. We are going to deprive you of an enemy."

[4] Unfried, Peter. „Das große Missverständnis“ in Nassehi, Armin and Felixberger, Peter. *Kursbuch 197: Das Grün*. 02 March 2019.



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