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Beyond the Berlin Republic: Germany’s Road to the Polls

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German federal elections are set to take place in September 2021, at a time when the country’s political landscape is undergoing significant transformations sparked by both internal and external forces. In the first of a two-part series ahead of the elections, Reinhard Olschanski looks at the path German democracy has travelled thus far, how it has selected the contenders for the crucial role of chancellor, and the key challenges that lie ahead for Greens in particular as campaigning intensifies.

For all their wildness, the 1960s and 70s appear today as a phase of relative clarity. The world was dominated by the bloc opposition of two superpowers and their camps, and German politics were similarly binary. In West Germany, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats were the domestic superpowers of parliamentary democracywith a small liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) in between. This arrangement remained in place up until the early 1980s, when the Greens arrived on the scene. But initially, for many, the party was cut from the flesh of social democracy and did not fundamentally alter the binary logic of the blocs. The year 1989, which marked the end of a short 20th century, German reunification in 1990 are even more visible as landmarks.

From the Rhenish Republic to the Berlin Republic

Reunification took place formally as the accession of the German Democratic Republic not as a sovereign act of refoundation. In the new Länder (regions), this was to have major socio-psychological consequences. For millions of people, the old, if little-loved, world collapsed, raising questions about the meaning of many lives. At the same time, the Second Federal Republic remained equipped with all the trappings of the first. Bonn in the Rhineland remained the capital for the time being. The old chancellor, Helmut Kohl, became the new one. The experience of reunification in the West diminished the awareness that much had changed at all. After all, the US was still a superpower. The global code was now bloc confrontation minus one.

Only gradually did people in what was then West Germany start to feel how much had changed. The formation of the red-green government in 1998 marked a turning point towards a new, post-Kohl Zeitgeist. True to the old German motto of doing everything important late and, above all, first in spirit, the republic was culturally reborn. The move of the capital from Bonn to Berlin helped shape the cultural superstructure of a “Berlin Republic”. The increasingly pluralised and liberalised worldviews and ways of life – on the rise since the wild 1960s – were now also at the centre of politics. The victory of Christian Democratic Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2005 did not change this. She governed with the former chancellor’s party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was

suffering the consequences of Schröder's Hartz IV welfare reforms and was now threatened by the combination of East German socialists and its own left-wing splits that went on to form Die Linke.

Chancellor Merkel never dreamt of a spiritual and moral return to the past, as Helmut Kohl had when he took office in 1982. She recognised that there was no turning back time. So Germany celebrated the 2006 World Cup as a colourful, multicultural summer fairy tale – a special experience for the soccer-savvy country. Merkel went on to govern for a further 15 years in a pragmatic fashion – in two more, smaller grand coalitions with the SPD, and once, from 2009 to 2013, with the FDP.

An ever more plural parliament

In 2021, the old tankers of the CDU/CSU and the SPD are now suffering from the ravages of time. While 90 per cent of the electorate once rallied rally behind them, today that number is only slightly above 40 per cent. A colourful party system has emerged. Today, there are no fewer than seven parties in the German Bundestag: the two black sisters, the CDU and the Bavarian CSU, and add the SPD, the FDP, the Greens and Die Linke, as well as the right-wing populist and in parts extreme Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). It is the most politically plural Bundestag since the 1950s.

With the pluralisation of the political landscape, the old Left/Right divide has lost much of its salience. Except for the AfD and the Die Linke, all parties swear to belong to the centre. The CDU even claims to be "Die Mitte" [the centre] as such. The days when people could state with precision how far to the right or left they stood are over.

Internal pluralisation has been joined by the disorientating effects of globalisation. The experience of "Westlessness" during the Trump era was particularly disturbing for Germany. Until 1945, the struggle against the West and its liberal democratic constitution was a culturally defining motif of German imperialism and Nazism. Overcoming the corresponding ideology with the *Westbindung* [alignment with the West] of the Federal Republic was a great democratic learning step. Westlessness under Trump dealt a severe blow – together with the rise of China – to the "superpower binarism minus one" order into which Germany had settled. The certainties of geopolitics tied to the United States had temporarily disappeared. For a Federal Republic that saw itself as an economic end in itself, as "Deutschland AG", whose foreign policy was understood only in the sense of foreign economic policy, the result was the confusing experience of a world that seemed to be fragmenting not only domestically but also globally.

The Merkel era

That old binary codes were increasingly losing their currency was somewhat disconcerting in many parts of Germany, but not shocking. No one was threatening Germany directly. China remains distant, and is also Germany's most important trading partner. Above all, there was still "Mutti", the chancellor who governed calmly and pragmatically through all storms and crises. Unlike Margaret Thatcher, who wiped away questions about the relationship between womanhood and office with a hypermasculine style, Merkel took on the role of an almost genderless mother of the nation. With her unobtrusive presence, she was part of the interior design of the Berlin Republic. The most popular

politician for years, many Germans felt at home with her. Even if the familiar coordinates of political orientation had faded, the chancellor was still there at the centre.

Germany may have the unpleasant experience of realising that the old patriarchal thinking is much more deeply rooted than often assumed

However, material and cultural anxieties eventually became more palpable. The populist AfD emerged, founded by economics professors who, in the sovereign debt crisis that followed 2008, challenged Germany's close EU integration with D-Mark-national ideas and rejected any prospect of paying for supposedly lazy and disorganised Southern European countries. With the 2015 refugee crisis, the focus of populist resentment politics shifted. It railed against refugees and migrants, free media, and a supposed Merkel dictatorship. The goal was the polarisation of political culture. Instead of a common debate among political opponents, it was to be about a mutual closure of social groups. In the process, the influence of far-right forces in the AfD also increased, especially in former East Germany, where many neo-Nazi cadres had flocked from the West. In elections, the AfD often wins over 20 per cent of the votes in Eastern regions.

The refugee crisis made Merkel more defensive. Especially once her Bavarian sister party CSU copied the populist language of the AfD and mobilised against her. Only a bitter election defeat in Bavaria pushed the CDU to recivilise its political language. Nevertheless, Merkel announced that she would not run for chancellor again. It was thus clear that Merkel, the anchor of stability and identity, would be history from the fall of 2021. That she regained her old approval ratings during the pandemic did not change her mind. Germany would have to ask itself where it stands and where it wants to go.

Choosing the candidates

The first answer to the candidate question was provided by the Social Democrats, who chose their Vice-Chancellor and Finance Minister Olaf Scholz early on. The beleaguered party has had little luck with its last three candidates. In 2017, the nomination of former European politician Martin Schulz did have a short-term "Schulz effect", but the boost only lasted a few weeks. Party offices and meetings were filled with comrades who had not been seen for some time and who hoped that the SPD was back and could pick up where it had left off. However, what followed ultimately was a depressing 20.5 per cent vote share.

Nevertheless, the SPD found itself in government at the beginning of 2018, after long negotiations by German standards. A Jamaica coalition – named after the party colours black, green, and yellow of the CDU/CSU, the Greens, and the FDP – did not materialise. The Social Democrats did manage a few achievements in their unpopular coalition, for example, with a pension supplement for low earners and support programmes during the Covid-19 crisis. The stigma stemming from Olaf Scholz's role as architect of the Hartz IV reforms also receded into the background. Nevertheless, the party today polls at around 15 per cent. Unless it makes up ground against the Greens, Scholz's party could be confronted with the question of how realistic an SPD candidacy for chancellor is in the first place.

The search for a Christian Democrat candidate was more exciting. First came a preliminary decision in 2020 with the election of a new CDU party leader who traditionally has first access to the chancellor candidacy in the CDU/CSU. Armin Laschet won the election – ahead of Friedrich Merz, an old, conservative-market liberal adversary of Merkel.

For the first time, the electorate will have a Green alternative in the race [...]

Laschet is the prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state with 18 million inhabitants – located on the Rhine and Ruhr rivers and home to the industrial heart of the old Federal Republic. A Rhinelander, Laschet belongs to his party's cosmopolitan and liberal wing. In the 1990s, he even was close to the so-called *Pizza Connection*, a discussion group of young Christian Democratic and Green politicians who began to consider the then-remote prospect of collaboration.

To nominate a candidate for chancellor, the CDU had to agree with the smaller CSU. The process turned into a fierce finger-wagging match when CSU chairman and Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder announced his ambitions late, but emphatically, and pointed to his better poll ratings. Söder – like Sebastian Kurz in Austria or Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom – belongs to that species of highly media-savvy neo-politicians less concerned about the ends of politics than the exercise of it. Political content is to them roughly what Brexit was to Johnson – a tactical move to prevail in a competitive situation.

Söder – better known as a representative of the broad-legged rumbling regional conservatism of his CSU – discovered the worldly heart of a chancellor who addresses the questions of the day. As a sign of his devotion to ecological issues, he even literally hugged a tree. By constantly pushing ahead and outbidding Laschet, he used the pandemic to show up his more sedate and mediating rival, accepting undermining the entire CDU/CSU as collateral damage. But Söder's claim failed because it would have amounted to a coup against the leadership of the larger CDU. It would have resembled a Kurz or Johnson-esque turn for German Christian democracy. However, the grey eminence of the CDU, Wolfgang Schäuble, who still pulls the strings behind Merkel, ensured the decision went Laschet's way.

New harmony and old resentments

By contrast, the election of the Green candidate proceeded almost harmoniously for a party infamous for its internal squabbles. The two co-leaders, 51-year-old Robert Habeck, a philosopher and author, and 40-year-old Annalena Baerbock, dynamic and appealing to young people, have led the Greens to poll ratings of over 20 per cent. For the first time, the party thus not only chose the duo as its campaign leaders, but selected Baerbock as its candidate for chancellor, an international law expert and former competitive athlete, mother of two young children, who is committed to decarbonising the economy, defending women's and refugee rights, and forging an active and constructive role for Germany in the world. For the first time, the electorate will have a Green alternative in the race, as well as the traditional Christian Democrat and Social Democrat choices.

Of course, the opportunity brings new risks. The young Green candidate's start was somewhat bumpy with self-inflicted mishaps and the stoking of old anti-Green resentments.

A radical free-market lobby group placed ads in German newspapers for nearly 500,000 euros, showing Baerbock in an orientalising get-up and holding Mosaic tablets proclaiming the "Green prohibition policy". This attack not only drew on the anti-Semitic trope, which sees Judaism as a religion of prohibition, clichés about Green politics, but also deployed deep-seated misogyny that the Mutti code of the Merkel era had temporarily disguised. With a young progressive woman at the forefront of politics, Germany may have the unpleasant experience of realising that the old patriarchal thinking is much more deeply rooted than often assumed. Currently, the candidate is also defending herself against allegations of plagiarism regarding quotes contained in her new book that were taken from the Internet (despite the quotes not being subject to copyright, nor the book itself a scientific one subject to strict citation requirements).

But the other two candidates are also under fire. As finance minister, Scholz is said to have neglected supervisory duties toward Wirecard– a company that went bankrupt. In addition, officials in his ministry are said to have calculated his party's tax concept, which would be an unauthorised form of party financing. And Laschet is struggling with the shortcoming of being perceived as his party's second choice. He is also struggling to distance himself from right-wing populists such as Maaßen, the former head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, whom Laschet's Thuringian party colleagues have nominated as a candidate for the Bundestag.

Meanwhile, the nature of the attacks has begun to obscure the substance of the election campaign. This should be a warning above all for the Greens, who value substance more than most. An element in their favour is that after Covid-19, climate protection is currently the most pressing issue for voters. However, they have left races in the past disappointed, even as polls in the run-up put them in the lead. The old, often-represented image of the Greens could be especially risky now that they are the main opponent of the two "people's parties". Sharp demarcations can be vital for the survival of a 10 per cent party. But the Greens are now looking to win over the broad mainstream of society. Few understand this better than Winfried Kretschmann, the first Green minister-president in the eco- and high-tech-savvy state of Baden-Württemberg, who is the most popular politician after Merkel. He and others have established a style of discourse characterised by listening and dialogue, not the proselytising of earlier days.

The Greens should defend the dialogic style of policymaking – even when they themselves are under fire from the opposition. And they should not allow a false and superficial personalisation to obscure the substance that distinguishes them. Only then can they claim to play a strong role in this important European country.

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