

Introduction

The Drama of 2005 and the Future of German Politics

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I recall a conversation from a while back with a colleague. He was disdainful of German politics, stating that they are ponderous, lack-luster, even boring. He prefers to follow Italian politics because of the intrigue, emotion, and, most of all, the drama. Although forced to agree at the time that the contrast between the two countries could not be greater, I was also immediately reminded of the old (apocryphal) Chinese curse, “may you live in interesting times.”

My, how times have changed. German political life has witnessed some of the most dramatic events since at least the period of unification over fifteen years ago, and perhaps since the inception of the Federal Republic. It is this highly important and dramatic 2005 election to which this special issue of *German Politics and Society* is dedicated. The contributors analyze the results, but also locate current developments in the history and traditions of the Federal Republic. Just as important, they project trends and policies into the future. What will Angela Merkel and her grand coalition achieve? What will become of the German party system? What long-term structural changes are affecting German politics and policy-making?

Drama on the Left

As with the interpretation of any drama, one must first begin with a plot summary—an overview of the major, attention-grabbing developments. The narrative begins with a string of electoral defeats at the regional level that culminated in the Social Democrats (SPD) losing the state election in North Rhine Westphalia in late May 2005.

This in itself was remarkable, seeing that the old Ruhrgebiet was a heartland of SPD support, ruled by the Social Democrats (at least as senior coalition partners) for nearly forty consecutive years. One of the reasons for this defeat was Chancellor Schröder's severe loss of support within his own party. Almost always fractious and divided between centrist moderates and trade union-oriented leftists, the party could not maintain solidarity and support in the face of the Red-Green government's reformist agenda and program (Agenda 2010, Hartz Reforms, etc.)—and one might add, in the face of the daunting and structural economic and social problems that the country has faced for at least a decade. Radicals led inside and outside of the government by Oscar Lafontaine and others were never enamored of the telegenic, “American” centrism that Schröder represented, but at least he could win elections for the team. The regional defeats in the Länder eroded even this tenuous reason for radical support. Schröder understood acutely the magnitude of the party's defeat in North Rhine Westphalia and elsewhere (and not just because of the legislative gridlock that this created in the opposition-controlled Bundesrat) and the dangers of the loss of internal support. He soon launched unprecedented political and constitutional machinations to salvage his power.

His first step was to bring down his own government by consciously staging and then losing a vote of confidence on July 1. Schröder engineered this as a last ditch attempt to maintain power, by forcing his party to declare support for him and by catching the opposition off-guard with the unexpected election that would have to follow. Of course, his official justification was that he lacked a mandate to govern and to implement his reforms and was calling the election early to obtain one. He added that Germany could not afford to lose another year or even two (until the next regularly scheduled Bundestag election) because of weak governance and gridlock. The constructive vote of non-confidence and other parliamentary norms were not supposed to allow for such a Weimaresque tactic. Yet, the Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) ruled on August 25 that it was constitutional and that a new election, already under way, was indeed necessary. Postwar Germany rarely had witnessed such expert maneuvering, nor such an adept political operative. Most surprising of all was that it almost worked, in light of

the eventual result—with the SPD retaining 34.2 percent support—versus just 35.2 percent for the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU).¹ Despite this unexpectedly strong showing and some valiant attempts to try to remain chancellor, Schröder was gone quickly from the political stage (as were many other senior political figures). Finally, in the worst “American” fashion he very soon took up a high-level position on the board of a German-Russian pipeline consortium (Gazprom), a decision that generated enormous criticism given that he advocated this deal while in public office (and which was retrospective evidence for his overly close relationship with Putin and Russia).

Drama on the Right

There was also more than enough drama on the other side. The rise of Angela Merkel, the first female party leader and chancellor in German history (as well as the first Easterner since unification), has been long in coming. Her steadfast, largely private maneuvering began already in earnest when she took over as General Secretary of the CDU in 1998. As in an ancient Greek tragedy, these traits were on full display when she denounced her original political sponsor Helmut Kohl and Wolfgang Schäuble in 1999 in the midst of the CDU party financing scandal, becoming party leader in 2000. Having lost the Right’s chancellor candidate spot in 2002 to Bavaria’s Edmund Stoiber (in retrospect an adept move, given the likelihood that the SPD-green government would be re-elected and given the importance of exhausting her internal opponents), she quietly assured herself of this position by 2005. Since her ascendance within the party and now to the chancellorship, she has faced vociferous opposition from traditional party bigwigs and especially from the entrenched regional bosses like Stoiber, Roland Koch of Hessen and Christian Wulf in Lower Saxony. Nevertheless, she has outmaneuvered them all, gaining the highest office in the land—and these behind-the-scenes political skills, though often ignored, are some of her greatest assets.

Yet, it should not be forgotten that one big component of Merkel’s drama in 2005 was the unprecedented loss of voters’ support by election day. Polling only 35 percent of the vote (less than Stoiber in 2002 and the one of the worst results for the conservatives since

World War II), she blew a 20-point lead, according to public opinion polls taken in the early summer. The reasons behind “her” loss of support included: the exceptional political gifts of Schröder—both personally as exemplified by his resounding “victory” in the televised debate on September 4 and in terms of the slick, even populist campaign that his SPD ran; tepid support from her party, especially the regional bosses; her own lackluster campaigning style; some missteps on the campaign trail (especially some controversial remarks about the desirability of a flat tax from her shadow finance minister, Paul Kirchhoff); a hurried campaign platform; and, last but not least, the extremely challenging economic and social issues that the country currently faces, where solutions are in short supply and support for radical reforms amongst the electorate is even lower. The eventual poor CDU result and the most fragmented Bundestag ever—with five parties achieving significant representation and the two people’s parties receiving less than 70 percent of the vote between them—made traditional coalition options untenable. Despite weeks of dramatic speculation over unusual coalition combinations, the widely disparaged grand coalition emerged as the only viable option.

Minidramas

There were other dramatic sub-plots affecting the smaller parties that provided even more excitement. The free market and generally libertarian Free Democrats (FDP) scored their best result since the unity election of 1990 and seem to have returned to their levels of support in the 1970s and 1980s. Almost all of this support came from Western Germany (unlike the election of 1990) and the party did not even make nominal efforts to reach out to the East. Nevertheless, this strong result shows that support for the kinds of neoliberal reforms that many think Germany needs is not unsubstantial, at least amongst Westerners. The Greens also did relatively well, having avoided a significant loss of support despite sharing governing responsibility for seven years and despite the persistent internal dissension between “realos” and “fundis.” It is rather interesting that the SPD tore itself apart over the course of Schröder’s chancellorship but the ever-feisty Greens (how many times did former Foreign

Minister Joschka Fischer have eggs or paint thrown at him during party congresses?) did not.

More important was the formation and then strong result of a new party, formed by the former East German communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and dissident left-wing factions of the SPD. Led by the charismatic Gregor Gysi and Oscar Lafontaine (long the bane of the Schröder-Müntefering SPD), the new Left Party gained 8.7 percent of the vote nationwide, but over 25 percent (more than the CDU) in the East. Most importantly, this new party has been able to move beyond the old PDS' ghettoization in the East, making major in-roads in the West—in fact, gaining 4.9 percent of the vote there (although see Jeffrey Kopstein and Daniel Ziblatt's article in this issue for a different interpretation). The consequences of this new party and its occupation of the left side of the ideological spectrum are open and potentially massive. On the one hand, this might signify the resurgence of a radical and ideological left wing in German politics, un-checked by the moderating tendencies of the dominant pragmatic faction of the SPD. Splintering on this side of the spectrum may make the Left incapable of governing as a bloc for quite some time. On the other hand, radicals may leave the SPD to the pragmatists, making it easier for the rump party to govern and run postmodern election campaigns around valence issues, competence and leadership. Of course, there is often the need in any democracy for a protest movement and, one could say this is better coming from the Left (especially in Germany with its ever present past) than the Right.

On the other side of the spectrum, early in the year there was widespread fear that radical rightists would do much better than in the past and actually surmount the 5 percent electoral threshold to gain representation in the Bundestag. Many observers feared the worst because persistent economic problems, especially in the East, have created a significant support base for these parties, manifested in recent state electoral successes—most notably the National Democratic Party (NPD) receiving 9 percent in the Saxon Landtag election of 2004. There were also unprecedented efforts to achieve unity amongst extreme Right parties. But, once again, divisiveness, lack of professionalism, poor leadership, the existence of another protest party—the Left Party had engaged in anti-foreigner, anti-immigrant

scaremongering—and, one might add, the German electorate’s continued reluctance to support such radical parties, resulted in a combined percentage well short of the threshold. But, as Lars Rensmann writes in his contribution to this special issue, many of the underlying problems that empower these parties and the trends towards greater organization continue, making these parties a continued threat in the future (perhaps as a consequence of the grand coalition and the pervasive economic and social malaise in the East).

Real or Superficial Changes?

Of course, often in political life there can be much surface drama, but behind the scenes or structurally, not much changes. Postwar Italy is an excellent example—where much instability on the surface (basically a new government every year) misled observers away from the real problem—a hyper-stable, rather ossified party system centered on the Christian Democrats and an entrenched, corrupt ruling elite. What is the case in Germany? Was last year’s drama merely superficial, or are there real, structural issues surfacing?

Two relatively simple calculations over time can help to shed some light on this. First, electoral volatility (based on seats won by parties in the Bundestag) has increased, as Table One indicates:

Table 1: Electoral Volatility (based on seats) in the Bundestag

Election (compared to previous)	Volatility, %
2005	10.54
2002	7.97
1998	7.96
1994	9.37
1990	8.35
1987	5.61
1983	8.76
1980 (1976)	3.37

Source: www.bundeswahlleiter.de. Volatility is calculated: $V_t = 1/2 (\sum | P(t-1) - P_t |)$. Where V_t is volatility at any given year compared to the last election; P_t is the party’s seat share (% rounded to two decimal places) in the current time; P_{t-1} is seat share in the last election.

The 2005 result represents a 32 percent increase compared to 2002, yet a rather large 213% increase from the (exceptionally low) figure of

1980. Yet, according to Peter Mair, the average volatility based on votes in Europe was 8.7 percent, the 100 year average between 1885 and 1985 was 8.6 percent.² Some estimates show slightly higher volatility for the 1990s in Europe (perhaps about 12 percent).³ By these standards, electoral volatility in Germany after unification has been at or below long-term cross-national averages and, hence, does not indicate precipitous changes in the fortunes of the parties.

Secondly, I look at seat allocation in the Bundestag and calculate the effective number of parties (based again on seats allocated).

Table 2: Seat Allocation in the Bundestag since 1980

	PDS*/Other**		Greens		SPD		FDP		CDU-CSU	
2005	54	8.79%	51	8.31%	222	36.16%	61	9.93%	226	36.81%
2002	2	0.33%	55	9.12%	251	41.60%	47	7.79%	248	41.13%
1998	36	5.38%	47	7.03%	298	44.54%	43	6.43%	245	36.62%
1994	30	4.46%	49	7.29%	252	37.50%	47	6.99%	294	43.75%
1990	17	2.57%	8	1.21%	239	36.10%	79	11.93%	319	48.19%
1987	2		42	8.09%	193	37.19%	48	9.25%	234	45.09%
1983	1		27	5.19%	202	38.85%	35	6.73%	255	49.04%
1980					228	43.93%	54	10.40%	237	45.66%

Source: www.bundeswahlleiter.de.

* in 2005 the PDS combined with rogue elements from the SPD to form the new Left Party

** in 1983 and 1987 Alternative Liste (AL) received these seats

Table 3: Effective Number of Parties (based on seats) in the Bundestag since 1980

Election Year	Effective Number of Parties
2005	3.44
2002	2.80
1998	2.90
1994	2.89
1990	2.65
1987	2.80
1983	2.51
1980	2.42

Source: www.bundeswahlleiter.de. Effective number of parties is: $(N)=1/?(p^2)$, where p is the proportion of votes or seats in a given year.

Here, some more noticeable changes have set in, namely a greater than 0.6 absolute increase in the number of effective parties between 2002 and 2005, which corresponds to a 23 percent increase—yet a larger 42 percent increase compared to 1980. Interestingly, the

number of effective parties hovered within a narrow band of only 0.4 for twenty-two years and seven Bundestag elections—barely changing despite the entry of the Greens in 1983 and the potential convulsions of the first all-German unity election in 1990. The rather marked increase in 2005 compared to previous Bundestags is an important change. Even this change is nowhere near as dramatic as some of the changes in other countries after so-called electoral earthquakes—such as Italy in 1994 or in Canada 1993. Nevertheless, the qualitative nature and dynamics of the German party system have shifted: from a two or two-and-one-half party system, firmly into the moderate multiparty category (the effective number of parties ranges between three and five or six).⁴ Whether this trend toward more effective parties will continue in future elections, even leading to a Weimaresque “extreme multi-party system” is something important to ponder, perhaps for the first time since World War Two.

Many of the authors in this special issue provide detailed data on public opinion, voting trends within sub-groups of the German electorate (East-West, Catholics, unionized workers, right radicals), the changing ideological spectrum in the Federal Republic (David Conradt, Ludger Helms, Hermann Schmitt and Andreas Wüst), as well as more structural data on cleavage structures and social changes (Jeffrey Kopstein and Daniel Ziblatt). Other contributors look at long-term changes and project trends into the future. Dorothee Heisenberg, for example, looks at recent characteristics of German EU policy-making and offers her prognosis of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s likely attitudes and policies. Lars Rensmann analyzes extreme Right parties and their continuing inability to make an electoral breakthrough at the national level. Several more qualitative analyses embed and historicize current developments in postwar German traditions. Ludger Helms compares and contrasts the first grand coalition (1966-1969) to the current one, paying particular attention to the larger political context and the informal mechanisms and personal relationships that are necessary to make this kind of government work. Jackson Janes discusses transatlantic relations and the bilateral relationship between Germany and the United States, focusing especially on the relationships between presidents and chancellors. Myra Marx-Ferree looks at Merkel’s relationship with German feminism and argues that the achievements of several

generations of women and feminist leaders paved the way for her success (whether Merkel admits it or not).

Looking Forward

Was this drama over the last year superficial or an indication of real changes? The contributors to this special issue come to differing conclusions about the magnitude (or not) of the changes that the last year in German politics signify. There are surely many open questions regarding the short- and medium-term performance of the new government, as well as regarding long-term, structural issues. Merkel's grand coalition is seemingly off to a positive start especially in terms of foreign policy (a rapprochement with the United States and the Bush Administration in particular) and EU policy (where Merkel has reasserted forcefully the old German role of deal-maker and consensus-builder). There also seems to be major movement in terms of reforming the overly-constraining federal system, education and even health care spending. In fact, in the early Spring of 2006, Merkel herself had the highest approval rating ever for a postwar chancellor—over 80 percent.⁵ Will she be able to continue this momentum? Will her reformist efforts be too piecemeal and fail to address the deep, structural problems that the country faces? Will the persistent, even growing East-West cleavage be overcome? Will her grand coalition last a full term? And what comes after that? A strong and reformist CDU-FDP majority? Or weak and fragmented “Weimar” coalitions?

These are questions that only time and further research will be able to address. Of course, the greatest questions of them all will be whether the drama continues, whether Germany has been “Italianized,” and whether this potential drama will be Germany's salvation or curse.

Notes

1. All national vote totals correspond to “second” party list results.
2. Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver, Peter Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe* (Boston, 2001), 263.
3. Andrew Puruis, Land of Smiles, *Time Europe*, 1 April, 2006.
4. My party system categories are: one party two party ($N < 3$), moderate multiparty ($3 < N < 5$), and extreme multiparty ($N > 5$). This modified formulation is based on Jean Blondel, *An Introduction to Comparative Government* (New York, 1969), 166; Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge, 1976), 125; Avend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, 1999), ch. 5. Note that for all calculations I have counted the CDU/CSU as one, diverging from Lijphart who counts them as one and a half (1999, 71).
5. Volatility can be calculated based on parties’ vote or seat share, and the two calculations are highly correlated. These figures are meant to contextualize the German case. Note that the high level of proportionality in the German electoral system results in a close correspondence between the two results. Peter Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations* (Oxford, 1997), 80, 67. See also Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair, *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates, 1885-1985* (Cambridge, 1990).