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The Outcome of the September 2005 Elections (September 19, 2005)

The close outcome of the September 2005 Bundestag elections surprised pollsters, who had predicted a majority for a CDU/CSU and FDP coalition. Here, the director of Forsa, a major polling institute, analyzes the results. He focuses in particular on the loss of voter support for the two mainstream parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD.

Continued Decline in Significance for the Two Mainstream Parties; Forsa Institute Analysis of the Bundestag Election on Sunday

Manfred Güllner, head of the Forsa Institute in Berlin, has analyzed the results of Sunday's Bundestag elections for the Associated Press. Here is his report:

“The results of the Bundestag elections on Sunday are yet another milestone marking the declining significance of the two mainstream parties, a trend that has been observable for years. Only 53 of every 100 eligible voters voted for either the SPD or the Union [CDU/CSU]. Almost as many (47 percent of eligible voters) either abstained from voting altogether or voted for one of the smaller parties. The two mainstream parties were shown less trust only in the first Bundestag elections in 1949, when the democratic party system in Germany still hadn't been firmly established after the collapse of the Nazi regime.

As early as 1953, however, 62 of every 100 eligible voters were choosing either the Social Democrats or the Christian Democrats. In the Bundestag elections of the 1970s, this share rose to 82 percent of eligible voters. Since then, the percentage of eligible voters who voted for one of the two mainstream parties has been declining again. In 1987, only 68 of every 100 eligible voters chose either the Union or the SPD. Since the first all-German election in 1990, the share has hovered around the 60 percent mark, and in 2005 it fell to an all-time low.

The decline in confidence in the SPD (only 26 of every 100 eligible voters voted for the SPD on Sunday, confidence in the Social Democrats was lower only in the 1953 Bundestag elections and in the first all-German elections in 1990, when Oskar Lafontaine was the party's candidate for chancellor) came as no surprise. Many former SPD voters were deeply disappointed by the fact that their party hadn't given sufficient support to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's reform

course and that this lack of support from his own party had forced Schröder to call for new elections.

In July, only around 12 million eligible voters were planning to vote for the SPD. With the aid of new, internet-based survey methods, Forsa polls were able to ascertain for N-TV and *Die Welt am Sonntag* that over the course of the election campaign the SPD managed to win back 3.9 million voters from 2002 who had previously been lingering in the undecided camp. But with 16.1 million votes, the SPD fell well short of its 2002 voter share, not to mention its 1998 share. Compared with the last Bundestag elections in 2002, the SPD lost more than 1 in 10 voters; and compared with the 1998 elections, it lost as many as 1 in 5.

Whereas the loss of confidence in the SPD had been expected, it came as a surprise in the case of the Union, especially since election research institutes hadn't predicted this loss of confidence on the basis of polls conducted prior to the election. Only 27 of every 100 eligible voters chose the Union. This represents an eleven percent decline in voters in comparison with the last Bundestag elections in 2002, and a loss of almost six percent in comparison with the elections before that in 1998. This means that Angela Merkel garnered fewer votes for the Union than Helmut Kohl did in his last election as a candidate for chancellor. In comparison with the first Helmut Kohl election on March 6, 1983 (the first election after the change of government in 1982), when 43 of every 100 eligible voters chose the Union, the CDU/CSU's voter base shrank by almost 38 percent.

Reservations about Merkel

Evidently, reservations about Angel Merkel the candidate had become so numerous within her own camp in the final phase of the campaign that even a portion of those who had declared their support for the Union in polls conducted prior to the elections didn't end up voting for the CDU or the CSU on election day. Roughly 2.5 million former CDU/CSU voters abstained from voting on account of these reservations. And about 1.5 million didn't vote for the Union, as they had done before, but for the FDP instead.

Merkel's main handicap was that she hadn't acquired enough of an identity in the reunified Germany to satisfy voters. For the "Ossis,"¹ she had ceased to be an "Ossi" as soon as she became integrated into the Kohl government and the leadership structure of the CDU; at the same time, she wasn't accepted by the "Wessis" as a "Wessi."

Therefore, Angela Merkel's backing among her own supporters was much weaker than Gerhard Schröder's among SPD supporters. In 2005, as in 2002, more than 90 percent of SPD supporters chose Schröder as their preferred chancellor, but only 78 percent of CDU and 62

¹ "Ossi" and "Wessi" are (slightly derogatory) terms used to denote citizens from former East Germany (GDR) and the former West Germany (FRG), respectively – trans.

percent of CSU supporters chose Merkel as theirs. With 79 percent of CDU supporters and 90 percent of CSU supporters, [Edmund] Stoiber's backing in 2002 was stronger.

Additionally, the fact that television was once again the dominant media form in this election had further negative effects for Merkel: 70 percent of all voters had obtained their information on the election through televised election programming. Posters and billboards were the only traditional forms of advertising that still played a role. And on television the incumbent usually fared better with viewers than his challenger. Furthermore, the television images exposed the stylized posters of Merkel as lies, causing her further identity problems. The contradiction between the illusory world of billboards and posters and the world of television, which viewers perceive as real, was too extreme.

Furthermore, many potential voters (including Union supporters) did not associate Angela Merkel the candidate with much hope for the future. In the 1998 campaign, however, great hope had been attached to Schröder's candidacy (at the time, Schröder was regarded by a majority of the population as young, dynamic, and modern. People believed that he was familiar with the demands of the economy, could bring about an economic upswing, had a vision for the future, and that he was a new kind of politician). Only very few voters ascribed these attributes to Merkel in 2005. She was viewed as diligent and disciplined, but not as personable, modern, young, or dynamic, or as a new kind of politician. Actually, only very few felt that a change in government and a CDU/CSU-led government would improve conditions in the country.

The aforementioned abstention of a share of potential CDU/CSU voters was the result. On Sunday, the Union was ahead of the SPD in only one of Germany's three distinct electoral regions: in Bavaria, the CSU received 49.3 percent of valid votes, whereas the SPD received 25.5 percent. In Eastern Germany, as in the remainder of the country, however, the SPD was the strongest party. The SPD came in ahead of the CDU in the East (30.5 versus 25.3 percent of valid votes) as well as in the West (excluding Bavaria) (37.3 versus 34.8 percent).

Decline in Voters for the CSU in Bavaria

Moreover, the Union also received more than 820,000 fewer votes in Bavaria than it did in 2002, which is more than a 20 percent decline. Thus, the Union lost as many votes in Bavaria as it did in all of the other "old" federal states [former West Germany] combined, where the CDU lost 813,000 votes. In the third electoral region, the "new" federal states [i.e., former East Germany], the CDU received 205,000 fewer votes, a decline of eight percent.

The two mainstream parties were the losers in this election; the FDP and the new Left Party were the winners. The FDP was strengthened primarily by "borrowed votes" from the Union camp. But the Liberals were also chosen by a segment of tactical voters who remain undecided until shortly before the election. This group of tactical voters deliberately supported the FDP so that it could have a correcting influence in the event of a coalition with the Union.

Of the nearly 4.1 million people who voted for the new left-wing alliance between the PDS [*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* or Party of Democratic Socialism] and the WASG [*Wahlalternative Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit* or Labor and Social Justice Electoral Alternative], 54 percent came from the Eastern part of the country (2.2 million) and 46 percent from the West (almost 1.9 million). The increase, however, was larger in the West (+1.4 million votes) than the East, where the Left Party gained almost 770,000 votes. Nonetheless, despite the electoral success of the Left, it is unclear whether this new agglomeration will be able to establish itself on the party spectrum on a long-term basis, since the vastly different composition of party supporters in East and West could prove challenging.

NPD Just Misses the Five-Percent Mark in Saxony

On a national level, the right-wing extremist NPD [*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or National Democratic Party of Germany] didn't play a role in this Bundestag election. However, the NPD's share of the vote varies considerably from region to region. The NPD received only 0.8 percent of valid votes in North Rhine-Westphalia, and 1.3 percent in Bavaria. But it got an average of 3.6 percent in the new federal states, and, in the Free State of Saxony, the NPD almost cleared the five-percent hurdle with 4.9 percent.² Thus, in the East, the Left Party was not able to capture some of the protest vote from the right, as Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi claimed it could; instead, a pool of genuine right-wing extremist voters became visible.

Whether the mainstream parties will continue to experience a decline in significance after this election, whether the party spectrum will be further differentiated by the presence of the new Left Party, and whether the pool of potential right-wing extremist voters will be able to expand from the East to the entire country will depend not least on how the new government coalition will govern the country.”

Source: “Weiterer Bedeutungsverlust für die beiden großen Parteien. Forsa-Analyse der Bundestagswahl vom Sonntag” [“Continued Decline in Significance for the Two Mainstream Parties; Forsa Institute Analysis of the Bundestag Election on Sunday”], *Associated Press*, September 19, 2005.

Translation: Allison Brown

² Parties winning at least 5 percent of the vote are represented in the parliament – trans.