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A Left-of-Center Coalition? (October 29, 2009)

Based on coalition arithmetic, a broad range of alliances is now possible, but so far there has never been a coalition between the SPD, the Left Party, and the Greens (i.e., a Red-Red-Green coalition). This author explains why a three-way left-of-center coalition has never been formed and why the CDU and the SPD are the closest among the parties.

Mutual Distrust between the Greens and the Left Party: The Myth of a United Left

The election year has brought a number of new coalitions, but not a Red-Red-Green one.¹ This can be explained by the deep cleft between the Greens and the Left Party: the relationship between the hedonists and the works councils [Betriebsräte] is characterized by a deep mutual distrust.

Angela Merkel was reelected, as were the minister presidents of Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein. Coalition talks were concluded in Thuringia and Saarland, and negotiations on a “Jamaica coalition”² started in Saarland. The “super election year,” as 2009 is so readily called, has changed the political landscape in Germany, but in different ways than originally expected.

Three Black-Yellow³ alliances were forged: one on the federal level, one in Saxony, and one in Schleswig-Holstein. Additionally, there is a Grand Coalition in Thuringia and a Red-Red alliance in Brandenburg. We will even see the first Jamaica coalition, in Saarland, if it does not founder on its partners’ private business relations.

Only two combinations did not come about. This was foreseeable in the case of the “traffic light” coalition.⁴ But a Red-Red-Green alliance also failed to materialize, although this was the most talked-about constellation before the election. Both friend and foe had urged the SPD to finally support this option, for its own benefit, but also for the benefit of democracy, since it would have

¹ The political parties in Germany are commonly identified by their traditional colors: black for the CDU and CSU, red for the SPD and the Left Party, yellow for the FDP, and, of course, green for the Greens. Thus, a Red-Red-Green coalition is one between the SPD, the Left Party, and the Greens – trans.

² A coalition between the CDU (or CSU), the FDP, and the Greens is called a Jamaica coalition because it combines the colors of the Jamaican flag (see above) – trans.

³ The CDU/CSU and the FDP – trans.

⁴ The SPD, the Greens, and the CDU (or CSU) – trans.

meant the reestablishment of two clear political camps in Germany and the possibility of political change.

In four of the regional elections held over the past two years, the Greens could have had a majority together with the SPD and the Left Party: in Hamburg, Hesse, Thuringia, and Saarland. Yet this majority never came about. In two cases, the Greens preferred to enter into a coalition with the CDU. There were specific reasons for the failure [of a Red-Red-Green coalition] in each federal state. On the whole, however, a string of such coincidences can no longer be called coincidental. At the very least, talk of a Red-Red-Green camp seems premature.

Despite all the talk about the agonies of the Grand Coalition, the CDU and the SPD are the closest among all the parties in Germany today. A strong economy is necessary to ensure the redistribution of wealth – that is the credo that both mainstream parties espouse, though of course with different focuses. Their dwindling size is an indication that fewer and fewer people believe in this connection. The followers of the Left Party have given up hope that they will benefit from a flourishing economy. FDP voters consider a redistribution of wealth superfluous at best and misguided at worst.

The Greens are the most interesting case. Having sprung from a post-materialist impulse, they believe there is something small-minded about the obsession with the social welfare state and questions of redistributing wealth – as though nothing were more important than money. “We’re focused on the big picture” – this campaign slogan perfectly expresses all the contempt the Greens feel for people who base their voting decisions solely on their own wallets.

Their position can be understood as civic-minded in the best sense of the word, but of course a person has to be able to afford it. Contempt for the educationally disadvantaged sections of society is most pronounced in the milieu of university graduates who vote for the Greens. They have long considered “*prollig*” (proletarian) to be an insult; and for aesthetic reasons alone, they would never shop at Aldi discount supermarkets. This sets the hedonists in the Südstadt district of Cologne and in Berlin’s Prenzlauer Berg in opposition to the trade unionists and the works councils in the Left Party, whom the hedonists secretly abhor as old-fashioned squares. The lack of cosmopolitanism and the latent xenophobia in many leftwing circles is a horror to these Green Party voters.

This is why the debate battle between the Greens and the Left Party in the lead up to the regional elections in Thuringia and Saarland was much more than a tactical electoral skirmish intended to secure a few votes. One only had to hear representatives of both parties laying into each other in background discussions in Berlin in order to understand that there were expectations of something growing together that does not belong together at all.⁵

⁵ This is a play on a famous line from a speech delivered by Willy Brandt on November 10, 1989, the day after the Berlin Wall was opened. Referring to German unification, Brandt said, “Jetzt wächst zusammen was zusammen gehört” (“Now what belongs together grows together.”) – trans.

On the surface, it would seem that the attempt to form a Red-Red-Green coalition failed in Hesse on account of dissenters within the SPD, and in Thuringia on account of fights between the SPD and the Left Party for top staff positions. But in both cases, the Greens were bent on maintaining sufficient distance so that they could emerge unscathed from a Red-Red debacle. The same applies to the Left Party. The confusing statements in Erfurt about who would become minister president were just as detrimental to the formation of a Red-Red-Green government as Lafontaine's threats to launch a comeback in Saarland. At the end of the election year, doubts have been raised not only about the camp to which the Greens belong, but also about whether the Left Party is really determined to assume a role in government outside the two-way SPD-led alliances that have proven successful in the East.

Better a Twosome than a Threesome

The SPD was long berated for not formulating a position on the Left Party, but in the end it has become clear that the SPD is only partly to blame. A determined shift in its coalition policy alone will not return it to power. For the time being, only one thing is sure: two-way alliances will be formed wherever they are possible.

One model capable of showing how such alliances can work across traditional political boundaries can be seen in Hamburg. The CDU and the Greens have neatly carved up the most important area of responsibility assigned to the federal states: education policy. The Greens got their way in school policy and left universities to their coalition partners. Because of disputes over the coal-fired power station in Moorburg, the revolution that the Greens have unleashed with their six-year elementary school has gone almost unnoticed beyond Hamburg's borders. This revolution can only be appreciated if one recalls the resistance to reform in the German education system. Even the Americans couldn't achieve a comparable feat in the postwar period, despite the authority they had as an occupying power.

One lasting change during the election year has been the end of the CSU's special role. On the evening that party head Horst Seehofer signed the coalition agreement, he forever relinquished his party's claim to an absolute majority in Bavaria. His historical achievement was to reconcile the CSU with its future as a regional chapter of the CDU.

Source: Ralph Bollmann, "Grüne und Linkspartei fremdeln: Die Mär vom linken Lager," ["Mutual Distrust between the Greens and the Left Party: The Myth of a United Left"], *taz*, October 29, 2009, p. 12.

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