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The 2002 Bundestag Elections (September 25, 2002)

Writing for an American audience, German author Peter Schneider describes the governing red-green coalition's marginal victory in the 2002 Bundestag elections. (Schneider, it should be noted, has taught as a guest lecturer at various American universities and is close to the SPD.) Given the public's widespread dissatisfaction with the government, he was surprised by the outcome of the election. He attributes the coalition's victory to two factors: Schröder's leadership in confronting the flood disaster in the Eastern part of the country and his definitive rejection of the Iraq war.

Schroder's Little Win

As an observer of the German body politic I have been reminded of the inert patients in the film "Awakenings" – thanks to a new drug, they regain their old vitality for a brief moment, only to sink back into paralysis.

The floods that devastated Germany this summer unleashed an amazing burst of energy, organizational efficiency and community spirit. Hundreds of thousands rallied to volunteer and slogged away to the point of collapse, without asking the trade unions for permission; those not immediately affected stood in line at the bank to donate money. German virtues long forgotten suddenly reappeared, and this time for what was indisputably a good cause.

Just before the election, however, the same people seemed clueless – masters of the hangover even before the banquet. The biggest party appeared to be that of the undecided and those who had decided they wouldn't vote at all.

The prevailing mood was that nothing substantial would change no matter who joined the race. Articles appeared in foreign newspapers expressing concern about German apathy. "What's going on with the Germans?" they asked. "A nation that's slipped to last place in Europe in all major rankings is making no serious effort to pull itself out of the mire. Do the Germans need a state of emergency before they can act?"

At least the election has been decided. By the slimmest of margins, the Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition led by Chancellor Gerhard Schroder will stay in office, buoyed at the end by a flood and Mr. Schroder's stand against America's Iraq policy.

To put the complicated election results in simple terms, Germans were prepared to stick with Mr. Schroder but they wanted to punish his party, the Social Democrats, which they think has been too tentative in reforming Germany's sclerotic welfare state. At the same time, Germans decided to encourage the Christian Democratic Union, the opposition party that is more disposed to push the reforms, without embracing its leader, Edmund Stoiber, an embodiment of the inflexible, dour German. "Do something, even something painful," Germans are saying. "But try to do it so that we won't notice." In the end, the Social Democrats lost 42 seats while the Christian Democrats picked up 3 seats in the 603-member German Parliament.

Obviously, election results like these aren't very conducive to feelings of triumph among the voters or the parties.

People know, or at least sense, that what wasn't on the ballot was a release from the inaction that has paralyzed Germany for 20 years. There is a mesh of laws and regulations that would make the Lilliputians who immobilized Gulliver green with envy. We are saddled with an enormous bureaucracy (one civil servant – who cannot be fired – per every 14 adults), a rigid labor market, an outmoded educational system, a collapsing health service and a social security apparatus that makes a mockery of basic arithmetic: after all, how can more and more longer-living pensioners expect to draw the same benefits while less and less money is going into the public coffers?

But anyone who raises his sword to cut even one of the thousands of bonds faces an indomitable opponent: the unions. Though Germany's trade unions originally organized in order to protect the disenfranchised, they now only protect themselves. The unions have become powerful clubs dedicated to the privileges of their member-laborers against everyone else. They heed only one law of bargaining: always more, never less! No one, it seems, can govern against the unions. As a result, both the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats tried to curry their favor in this election as well.

But aren't we, the constantly complaining German electorate, part of the problem? Haven't we created the state we're now bemoaning: two large national parties, whose basic platforms differ so little that it's ultimately hard to say why we should vote at all? And if a politician did show up willing to tell us the truth, wouldn't we just send him packing?

In the months prior to the election, the voters grew so disappointed with the Schroder regime that re-election seemed almost out of the question. Two events turned the trend around: the summer deluge and the looming threat of war against Iraq.

The floods demonstrated that Mr. Schroder is able to respond quickly and unbureaucratically to an exceptional situation. In a moment of crisis, he enlarged himself.

No sooner had the floodwaters receded than the Bush administration appeared with its declaration against Iraq and became Mr. Schroder's unwitting supporter. There's no doubt that the chancellor's clear refusal to commit German troops to a unilateral American attack on Iraq dramatically helped his re-election. Since this probably hurt his standing with the U.S. to the same degree, I think the matter bears closer scrutiny.

Concerns about new or even old German anti-Americanism are really out of the question: it's enough to recall that on Sept. 11, 2001, a quarter of a million Berliners gathered at the Brandenburg Gate in a show of solidarity with the victims of the terrorist attacks. In the following days and weeks, the Schroder government translated this symbolic gesture into action. Germany has deployed 10,000 soldiers in Afghanistan. What's more, hundreds of German special forces took part in Operation Anaconda, fighting in the caves of Afghanistan alongside their British and American counterparts – though this is seldom reported in the American press.

If an American administration decides, without informing its European allies, that a second war is called for in order to unseat Saddam Hussein, then it should be prepared for international debate and even disagreement – unless it expects nothing less than blind obedience.

Mr. Schroder's refusal to commit German troops even if the United Nations calls for military intervention in Iraq is a different matter. With all understanding for the exigencies of running a campaign, it's clear that Mr. Schroder went too far with his evocation of a "German way." But isn't this declaration just as one-sided as Mr. Bush's pronounced willingness to stage a war against Iraq even without a United Nations mandate?

As far as the German elections are concerned, though, Mr. Schroder's unilateral approach to American unilateralism worked quite well: it was probably what won over just enough of the unconditional pacifists from the Green Party to prevent the Party of Democratic Socialism – the former Communist Party of East Germany – from obtaining the 5 percent necessary for representation in Parliament. Evidently Mr. Schroder has learned from American campaigns that only a candidate who has mastered all the tricks is ultimately worthy of becoming president or chancellor. I have no doubt that the successful sinner, Mr. Schroder, will quickly pick up the foreign policy pieces he shattered during the campaign.

But the rewards of his foreign policy independence will be short-lived unless he becomes a different chancellor – one who is prepared to cut the tangle of threads keeping the German Gulliver on its back.

Peter Schneider is the author, most recently, of "Eduard's Homecoming." His article was translated from German by Philip Boehm.

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