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# What lessons are to be learnt from the last regional elections in Germany's east?

Frank BAASNER

The elections in the Länder of Saxony and Brandenburg on 1st September last affected the German political situation far beyond the purely demographic weight of the two regions (6.5 million inhabitants out of 83 million). The traditional alliances in the German electoral system, which privileges proportionality, no longer seem possible to win stable parliamentary majorities.

The rise of the new right-wing party, mixing the conservative, the national liberal, the far right and the nationalist right-wing movements, which is promising an "Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)", obliges response on the part of all of the traditional parties. The only ones to have saved face are the Greens, who significantly improved their score in both Länder, where previously they only had achieved weak results.

Hence, there are two winning parties in a political system that has tended to be rather more stable and in which any upheaval leads to violent response.

## UNDERSTANDING THE VOTE IN SUPPORT OF THE AfD

Explaining the (relative) success of the Greens seems simple. The question of climate change is motivating people at world level, especially young people. Indeed, the rise of the Greens in the East and also the West has been particularly strong amongst the young.

Understanding and analysing the rise of the AfD is much more difficult. Attempts to explain this have been numerous and differentiated. However, there is a consensus in addressing the issue from an historic point of view. Nazism, via its ideology, propaganda and intimidation had a profound influence over German society.

At the end of the Second World War, the occupied zones in West Germany were supported by the Western Allies in an admittedly painful, but necessary process of awareness raising to Nazi crimes and at the same time to democratisation.

In the country's Soviet occupied east, the development of the Cold War, and consequently the birth of two Germanies (RFA and RDA), was founded on a total rejection of Nazism. Many Germans who saw that avid Nazis could continue their careers in the western part of Germany joined the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which had self-defined as being anti-Nazi.

In reality, and to a certain extent, the GDR adjoined a new dictatorship on the ruins of the old one, without ever completely putting the Nazi totalitarian regime to rest. Suffice to say that the "old Nazis" were in the west, protected by Western ideological enemies, whilst the young "Republic" of workers and farmers was morally on the right side. Ultimately its citizens had only experienced authoritarian regimes, and even dictatorships for a duration of 66 years, from Hitler's seizure of power to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Anyone who wants to understand the specific features of the Länder in the East must take into consideration that the reunification of Germany occurred very quickly without any true debate about the future of the new entity. It was, in sum, an annexation of the Länder in the east – the official term being "Beitritt", i.e. "accession".

We can also make a parallel with the EU's 2004 Enlargement Process, when the new Member States had to transpose the community acquis into their national legislation, the difference being that the rapprochement process lasted years, even decades in this case. We therefore have to consider a triple shock that marked the population of the RDA for at least two generations: the Nazi dictatorship, the Communist

totalitarian regime, and an abrupt passage over to the Western system, together with the collective silence regarding the years after the Second World War.

## THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL VARIABLE

Other more empirical, rather than historic analyses point to the economic data of the regions where the AfD is particularly strong. Indeed, we note a link of cause and effect between the deprived areas (average wage, unemployment, demographic change, economic outlook)[1] and the vote for the AfD. It is symptomatic that the AfD's recent results come, in the main, from citizens who no longer bothered to go and vote and who seized the opportunity to vote for a new party which rallies different types of dissatisfied people. In the Land of Brandenburg 115,000 of the 297,000 votes came from citizens who had not taken part in any previous elections. In Saxony it was 246,000 out of the total 595,000 votes.[2]

The sociological analysis of the AfD's electorate clearly shows that it is mainly men who vote this way (29% against 19% of the female vote in Brandenburg and 33% against 22% in Saxony) in the age group 29-60 years. Pensioners generally maintain a "traditional" vote - CDU on the right and Die Linke (the former Communists of the RDA) on the left. The level of education of the AfD electorate is not very high. Often, they are workers who are disappointed by "their" traditional party, Die Linke, which governs in various coalitions and which has become both realistic and responsible. The AfD vote therefore masks social discontent, but also a protest vote – against the government, and against Merkel in particular. In the Land of Brandenburg 53% say they voted AfD out of protest, in Saxony only 30% say they did this, the others say they voted out of conviction.

The low educational level of most AfD voters contrasts with the party's image whose leaders mainly comprise higher education graduates, and even university professors. Hence, we might doubt their naivety: the leaders know exactly how to channel the population's disappointment.

## DEVELOPMENT OF A PARTY

The AfD had all but disappeared from the German political arena at the time of the banking crisis and when the Greek sovereign debt had almost been brought under control.

With the arrival of one million migrants in September 2015, the party found new momentum and oriented itself towards xenophobic nationalism. This moment also marked the rise of a battle between two trends in the party's executive, which continues today: on the one hand there are the national liberals who regret the social democratic orientation of Angela Merkel's CDU, but remain attached to the rule of law, together with various far right groups, including people who have frequented neo-Nazi milieu. The first trend seeks the position of a conservative, national party and it wants to govern with the CDU.

The leaders of the second trend quite simply demand "power". All or nothing, that is the motto which expresses in a surprisingly clear way their goal: to destroy the system in place and take power. It is quite similar to the strategy adopted by Matteo Salvini in Italy, which fortunately has not succeeded.

## THE QUESTION OF GERMAN IDENTITY AND THE POST-WAR MIGRATORY WAVES

The socio-economic situation of the impoverished communities is not enough however to explain everything, since the relation of cause and effect between socio-economic conditions and the AfD vote is not absolute. In the East there are some dynamic towns which have experienced a sharp rise in the number of AfD voters, as in the South-West of Germany, which is rich and enjoys full employment. Hence another question arises, linked to the issue of migrants, i.e. German identity.

Kurt Tucholsky, with his incomparable style that is often tinged with black humour and profound sarcasm declares that the German lose their mind once and for all when they are asked questions about who they were.

1. Franz, C. / Fratzscher, M. / Kritikos, A.: Gründe und AfD als neue Gegenpole der gesellschaftlichen Spaltung in Deutschland, DIW Wochenbericht 34/2019 (S. 591-603). See also a recent publication which undertakes in depth research into the „disconnected“ regions and the attitudes of their inhabitants: Teilhabeatlas Deutschland. Ungleichwertige Lebensverhältnisse und wie die Menschen sie wahrnehmen. Hrsg. vom Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung und Wüstenrot-Stiftung, August 2019.

2. Analysis of the results in Brandenburg and Saxony by one of the most reliable institutions: <https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Aktuelles/Wahlanalyse-Brandenburg/> <https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Aktuelles/Wahlanalyse-Sachsen/>

The present debate, the demands of certain groups for a German Germany, lacks historic perspective. We often forget that post-war Germany experienced multiple migratory phenomena, the first being the wave of refugees from the East of the Reich. Then came the workers from Southern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey, who largely helped to rebuild Germany's economy. Then came the political refugees in the wake of the collapse of the Shah in Iran, Jordanians and Palestinians, to mention but a few examples. After the enlargement of the EU, hundreds of thousands of Europeans fed into the labour market. Maintaining the idea of "a genetically pure Germany", one that has always been ridiculous, is unrealistic.

And so, from where does the aggression and hate, with which some thousands of citizens attack immigrants and the government come, with the latter suspected of wanting to dilute Germans amongst the mass of foreigners?

Following the migratory crisis of 2015, a barrier, which had been the rampart against purely, simplistic nationalist-xenophobic thought, banished from public debate for good historic reasons, seems to have collapsed. This consensus has been challenged, not only by the fanatics of Pegida (a violent anti-Islamic movement established in East Germany) and the Reichsbürger[3], but also by some of the representatives of the AfD's radical wing. Backlash finds expression in uninhibited declarations, published via the social networks but also during demonstrations, which was taboo but a few years ago.

The radical manner with which some groups stir up hate against immigrants is poisoning the debate over the future of a Germany, which if it wants to maintain its economic dynamism, should be multi-cultural. Raising the issue of German identity in a sober, intelligent manner has become almost impossible.

Political discourse for its part, is also changing, or has already changed significantly. A double split is emerging in Germany, as in other European countries. The first involves the type of language used: on the one hand, controversial, vulgar and aggressive, on the other,

rational and respectful. A second split, which is more difficult to define, typifies the present situation and is influencing the German political arena significantly: on the one hand, there are the representatives of the traditional parties, notably those in government, which in the public's point of view are not candid, and who do not dare to speak clearly of what is really worrying the citizens. On the other hand, the AfD has succeeded in positioning itself as an alternative: the party speaks of "censorship" and "fake news". It positions itself in the continuity of the peaceful revolution that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, as if it were necessary to get rid of the democratic system of West Germany to complete the revolution.

Two recent elections have thus strengthened an existing trend, comprising a mix of new divisions (economic, educational, territorial and discursive). Reflected in electoral dynamics, this means that the two upcoming parties are the Greens (especially in the West, urban, well educated, tolerant and young) and the AfD (especially in the East, not as educated, conservative aged 30 to 60). The two parties, which were the "main people's parties" (Volksparteien) and which aimed to represent all social classes, i.e. the CDU and the SPD are declining, both in the West and the East.

### WHAT ARE THE POLITICAL OPTIONS FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS?

The Bonn Republic has finally come to an end; its illusion of perseverance was maintained by the "grand coalitions" (GroKo), which, in reality, have become smaller and smaller. The very term "grand coalition" no longer means anything, the political field of the post-war decades is no longer relevant.

The new instability worries some, in Germany and abroad, because we have been accustomed to a Germany that has been politically strong in its structures and predictable in terms of its action. This is now part of the past. The future is forecast to be more uncertain. Which scenario can we provide for this transition phase and the uncertainty we are now experiencing?

3. Around 19,000 people living in Germany do not accept the authority of the German State, neither the passport, nor the police or the laws. They are fighting (sometimes with arms) for the union of Germanic tribes. The existence of these people has been known for a long time but recently they have become more aggressive and are acting in broad daylight.

Several options emerge, without us being able to say which will win through, especially because the situation in the various Länder and at federal level are not necessarily the same. At present there are more than 10 different coalitions in the 16 Länder and the Bund. Nearly everyone seems to be governing with nearly everyone else. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly unlikely for just two groups to be able to govern, which is pushing players towards new coalitions.

The traditional "left-right" split is no longer applicable, since the CDU has ruled out – for the time being at least – any coalition with the AfD. The CDU must therefore govern with one of the parties on the "left". The only prospect of a traditional right would be a scission within the AfD forming a national conservative party and a far-right movement. In this case, and it is quite possible that the party might divide – one option would be a CDU-new right coalition. On the left there is no majority at present. The traditional left party in the East (Die Linke) is declining, which is of course due to demography, but it is also to the fact that in the East the AfD has taken over the party's role which is to "understand and take care". As long as the SPD stagnates there will "no longer" be a left-wing majority.

There remains the possibility of a CDU-Green coalition, which is at present the most likely option. This would allow the CDU to repair its image as the conservative party, so that it stands out clearly from the Greens, which are conservative on some points, but not regarding questions pertaining to society (marriage for all etc ...). The example of Bad-Württemberg, where the Greens have governed with the CDU since 2016, shows that this combination can work. The existing tension within the Land's government is not surprising and is part of the democratic game. A major asset of this formation is that the two biggest parties are resolutely pro-European. If ever a CDU-Green government were to form at federal level, Germany would definitively have entered a new phase in its political development.

#### **WHAT PLACE FOR GERMANY IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD?**

Germany's European partners have accepted the

country's more or less declared leadership for years, each time that the EU did not succeed in acting as one, either to a lack of unanimity or community tools. Germany's role, described as the Diktat of austerity, has sometimes been – violently – challenged. However, the simple economic and demographic weight of the country, as well as the continuity of the Chancellor Merkel as head of government since 2005 have turned Germany into "the reluctant hegemon".

The present federal government, theoretically in place until autumn 2021, will not change its administrative routine. But we might expect that the next government to be formed, either quickly following an exit by the SPD from the grand coalition, or after general elections planned for September 2021, will launch debate regarding Germany's long-term strategy.

At present we note at least two lines of thought: Germany's economic size would allow it to continue in all circumstances – not as a leader like the US or China, but at a sufficiently high level to be able to defend its economic interests. Those who support this view also reject the projects involving Europe's political integration. From this standpoint Germany could become a kind of Japan within Europe.

The second view supports the idea that it is only within a united Europe which can speak with one voice that Germany will be able to find a promising future. It is clear that Germany will have to contribute more, including from a financial point of view to maintain a certain balance within the EU. We might even suppose that this way of seeing the future would be supported by a large majority within society.

But to date no German political party has dared put forward an ambitious European project for fear of their electorate. The Greens will probably be the ones to push more towards European integration because their electorate is relatively young and extremely pro-European.

We might be sceptical in terms of Germany's ability to find rapid political answers that are adapted to immediate challenges. The initiatives of the new

European Commission might encourage Germany to contribute more actively than in the previous years to debate over the future of Europe. Instead of pulling on the brakes Germany might become the pilot – together with some willing partners – and thereby at the helm of our common future. It is time to start a new stage, with new faces and a new political style.

This is because the pressure to change political pace and style is increasing and it is coming from all sides. The young generation is demanding a long-term strategic policy to slow climate change. The economic milieu deplores the massive lack of investments in infrastructures, in digital and training. Economists are challenging the government's budgetary strategy, which is set on one single target of budgetary balance, instead of taking advantage of the situation of zero or even negative rates of the German sovereign debt. Moreover, Germany's socio-economic situation is everything but glorious. Energy transition is not moving forward fast enough. The goals to reduce CO2 emissions will not be achieved. The lack of qualified labour is dramatic in certain sectors. There are not enough teachers in the primary sector. In terms of healthcare for the elderly there is great need for thousands of ancillaries and

nurses. The German economic model, based on the specialisation of products and exports, is extremely vulnerable in periods of trade war and/or in times of recession. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

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Probably a majority of German citizens is aware that the upheavals in the world are challenging the habits of the past and that these are forcing leaders to come up with new ambitions, other solutions and other working methods. The loss of confidence in the two government parties (CDU and SPD) that we have been witnessing for many years, is undoubtedly linked to the feeling of Germany's stagnation in a changing world.

Germany needs to wake up if it wants to continue to have both political and economic influence.

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**Frank Baasner**

Director of the Franco-German Institute (Institut Franco-Allemand (DFI)), member of the Robert Schuman Foundation's Scientific Committee

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