Democracy in Western Germany

Parties & Politics in the Federal Republic

Third Edition

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Preface to the Third Edition

Since *Democracy in Western Germany* first appeared in 1979 much has changed on the political scene. In the late 1970s, the SPD with Helmut Schmidt looked set to rule for a long time to come whilst the CDU languished in opposition. The roles have now been reversed and Schmidt discarded by his party. That much belongs to the fortunes of politics. A more fundamental development has been the rise of the Greens and the impact of the peace movement. These new movements may still fail to upset the ruling 'party cartel', but they are significant in their implications of a changing political culture.

For this new edition I have sought to integrate new material into the existing framework of the book, modifying and extending my original arguments where appropriate. Some issues now appear less salient; a case in point is the furore over the employment of radicals in the public service; nonetheless that debate probably enlightens us more about the nature of German politics than do more recent happenings.

Liberal democracy in Western Germany has shown itself to be a stable system of power. Yet the transformation that has taken place since 1945 can really be appreciated only by understanding the vicissitudes of German politics over the past century. Without an historical perspective we could easily lose sight of the factors that shaped the nature of the 'democratic problem' for Germany. It is another question whether those constraints are still operative or whether the Federal Republic is now best thought of as a 'new nation'.

G.S.
June 1986

Glossary of Party Abbreviations

ADF	Aktion Demokratischer Fortschritt
AL	Alternative Liste
AVP	Aktionsgemeinschaft Vierte Partei
BHE	Block der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten
BP	Bayern Partei
BVP	Bayerische Volkspartei
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei
DFU	Deutsche Friedens-Union
DKP	Deutsche Kommunistische Partei
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei
DP	Deutsche Partei
DReP	Deutsche Rechts-Partei
DRP	Deutsche Reichs-Partei
DStP	Deutsche Staatspartei
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei Deutschlands
GB	Gesamtdeutscher Block
GDP	Gesamtdeutsche Partei
GIM	Gruppe Internationale Marxisten
GVP	Gesamtdeutsche Volkspartei
KBW	Kommunistischer Bund Westdeutschland
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SRP	Sozialistische Reichspartei

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SSW	Südschleswigscher Wählerverband
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
WAV	Wirtschaftliche Aufbau-Vereinigung
WP	Wirtschaftspartei
Z	Zentrumspartei

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in 'the Christian ethic, humanism, and classical philosophy'. Equally important was the rejection of any dogmatic belief or claim to a special understanding of society: the SPD was not a 'church or counter-church', nor did it feel called upon to 'explain the history of mankind'. In arguing that 'socialism is not a substitute for religion', the SPD was at the same time admitting the essentially pluralist nature of West German society and identifying itself with that pluralism. If Social Democracy was to give up all claim to primacy for the working classes, then it had to recognise the legitimate interests and values of *all* sectors of society, not just those of one class: the admission was made specific in the case of religion, thus breaking with the old, anti-clerical tradition of the party.

If Social Democracy was to become an integral part of the pluralist order, the need for the SPD to regard itself as a 'class party' no longer carried weight, for the class orientation implied a quite different view of society: not pluralism but class conflict. Thus the Godesberg Programme explicitly dropped the 'class' label and instead claimed to be a party of the whole people, a *Volkspartei.*

What the SPD lost in 'critical perspective' in adopting the new programme, it gained in flexibility in its attitude towards current issues. The pragmatic approach removed the last shreds of its opposition to the market economy, recognising that its capabilities were still great and that the German people could ill afford to dispense with its benefits. In effect, the SPD subscribed to a defence of the economic order, but with the important caveat that the proper balance of economic power should be maintained, thus allowing the party in government to intervene as much as necessary to preserve 'economic freedom' although not so much as to impose a socialist economy as an article of belief. There should be just as much planning as necessary. In other matters, too, notably the questions of defence and European co-operation, the SPD came very near to identifying itself with the established policies of the Christian Democrats.

In one sense the SPD was 'catching up with Bernstein', for 'the final goal' had been jettisoned. But the new SPD went further than Bernstein would have countenanced, since for him 'the movement' was everything; yet in 1959, at one stroke, the movement, the revered forms, the symbols and the traditions of the party were cast aside. It is true that all the reform destroyed was a set of 'revolutionary myths' which were only a handicap to the SPD in its bid to win over new voters, but exactly how was the party to replace them in rekindling enthusiasm?

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The Godesberg Programme itself did not offer much scope, but at least its adoption did not lead to a split in the SPD, for it was finally accepted by 324 votes to 16. That result gave the party leaders cause for confidence in fighting future elections: their hands were not tied and they could compete more easily with the CDU by adopting a policy of *Annäherung*, which would minimise differences. Furthermore, the reform movement also brought Brandt to additional prominence in the party: the long interregnum (filled by Ollenhauer, who led the party to defeat in 1953 and 1957) was over. Ollenhauer remained party chairman, but Brandt was chosen as the party's chancellor candidate to fight the 1961 election.

Brandt's contribution of a new look to German politics – somewhat in the 'young Kennedy' style of the period – took the SPD out of the doldrums it had faced since the beginning of the republic. The picture, prior to the 1959 reforms, of a stagnating party was transformed by the successes of subsequent elections. A rapport was found with new sections of the electorate which had previously mistrusted Social Democracy. Despite successive defeats for the SPD in 1961 and 1965, the rising trend of popular support was unmistakable. In those circumstances, the place of both Brandt and the party programme was assured.

The real impetus – the imperative, even – behind the movement for reform was a determination to improve the SPD's chances of winning government power. The Godesberg reforms succeeded in two ways: by increasing the party's vote and by making the SPD more acceptable as a partner in government. Since the CDU was in a dominant position, the road to government, of necessity, seemed to run through a CDU–SPD alliance. Neither of the other possibilities – an outright majority for the SPD, or coalition with the Free Democrats – was at that stage a realistic option. Coalition with the CDU was the next logical step. It was an opportunity for the SPD to make the initial entry into government and to demonstrate that the party was *regierungsfähig*, that it could be entrusted with the responsibilities of governing the Federal Republic.

The strategy worked. Firstly, the 1966–9 coalition with the CDU showed that the SPD could work in harmony with other parties. Secondly, the party's performance in government was sufficiently reassuring to win over new sections of the electorate. Its confidence in government and the increase in the party's vote then enabled the SPD to rule independently of the CDU. By 1972, when the SPD became the largest party, it appeared that party reform had been entirely justified.

Yet subsequent developments cast doubt on the validity of the strategy, or at least made it evident that the Godesberg Programme was not an answer for all time. The rise in electoral support came to an abrupt halt after the 1972 election, and Brandt's resignation closed a chapter: his style of leadership – a kind of 'pragmatic idealism' – had somehow epitomised the spirit of Godesberg. A new era for the SPD opened when Helmut Schmidt became chancellor. He proved to be a forceful and capable head of government, able to hold together the coalition with the Free Democrats for over eight years, and – above all – Schmidt was a widely popular chancellor. All that should have benefited the SPD, but it did not. In 1976 the SPD vote fell sharply and it stagnated in 1980. Those were not dramatic shifts, but it seemed to many in the party that it had 'lost its way', that Schmidt was too content to act as the successful manager of the government enterprise, not risk basic reform. Moreover, it became apparent that the SPD would indefinitely have to rely on the support of the FDP – and that party would head off all attempts to make radical change.

The problems showed themselves in a growing discontent within the SPD over Schmidt's style of government leadership and his policies – most notably over the issue of stationing additional nuclear missiles in West Germany. At the same time, Schmidt found the FDP becoming a restive coalition partner, for instance in seeking a general financial retrenchment that the SPD was unwilling to adopt. By 1982, the tensions reached a breaking-point, and once the FDP had decamped to vote in a CDU chancellor, Schmidt found himself to be a spent force in the SPD – a stunning blow of fortune for a leader who, along with Adenauer, can be reckoned as a strong chancellor of the post-war period.

Yet, for his critics in the SPD, Schmidt represented the negative side of the Godesberg commitment, a cheerless pragmatism that squeezed out any remaining idealism. With the dismissal of Schmidt and the party in opposition, the further reverse at the March 1983 election came as no surprise. It meant that the SPD had a twofold problem: to win back electoral favour and to re-think its ideological position – and in both respects the party had to consider how to face up to the challenge of the fledgling Greens.

The Stages of Development

The special power of a catch-all party lies in its ability to accommodate a variety of social interests within its fold. Its initial success assumes that sympathetic changes in society are taking place, weak-

CDU and SPD Support at Federal Elections, 1949–1983

Election year	*CDU–CSU %*	*SPD %*	*Aggregate %*
1949	31.0	29.2	60.2
1953	45.2	28.8	74.0
1957	50.2	31.8	82.0
1961	45.4	36.2	81.6
1965	47.6	39.3	86.9
1969	46.1	42.7	88.8
1972	44.9	45.8	90.7
1976	48.6	42.6	91.2
1980	44.5	42.9	87.4
1983	48.8	38.2	87.0

ening existing political loyalties and diminishing the attractions of parties based on particular interests or strong ideology. But once the momentum has been established, the solvent process becomes progressive, especially when the 'logic' of the catch-all party system takes over. The concentration of the vote in the West German party system on the CDU and SPD until the 1980s illustrates this progression in an almost unnerving way.

The impact of these two parties – their aggregate share growing consistently, even when the fortunes of one or the other were in temporary decline – led nearly, but not quite, to a two-party system. The qualification is important, for the continued survival of the Free Democrats has modified the operation of the system in a significant way: the 'strategic presence' of the third party has given a flexibility to the party system which would otherwise be absent. The FDP itself acts as an 'agent of exchange' in the formation of coalitions and the alternation of governments, a role of critical importance if the two major parties are of comparable size.

At the present time West Germany has a 'balanced' party system: it has all the essential attributes of a two-party system, but with a different mechanism. Taking the idea of balance as the central point of reference, we can trace the evolution of the party system through a number of distinctive stages, although in practice the lines of demarcation are not always sharp.

1 The nascent system

How can the party system up to 1949 best be described? The parties were unable to operate freely, there was no German government to act as a focus for their activity, and they were mainly relegated to running the local affairs of the *Länder*. Yet the parties were

The Party System: Five Stages of Development

Stage	*Type*	*Period*	*Leading Features*
I	Nascence	1945–9	The period of party formation; restricted activities and powers; no central government; *Länder*-based parties.
II	Diffusion	1949–53	Low aggregate share of major parties; large number of parties represented; no clear polarisation.
III	Imbalance	1953–66	One party dominant, especially 1957–61. Government and coalition formation largely predetermined. Decline evident from 1961, particularly in coalition aspects.
IV	Transition	1966–9	Intermediate between imbalance and balance. Growing parity between major parties and high aggregate share. Coalition between them marks end of imbalance.
V	Balance	1969–	Potential of 'alternation' realised, through medium of third party, in 1969 and 1982. Balanced system maintained despite Green success in 1983.

not helpless; within limits they were able to compete. The system was not an entirely artificial structure imposed from above, and there was a gradual extension of party power and authority. Even though the responsibilities of party leaders were restricted, they acted in the knowledge that they were shortly to become responsible for the future West German state.

With hindsight we can also say that the nascent party system was also the vital formative stage for all subsequent development. Some of the essential characteristics were evident very early on, even in the first round of *Länder* elections held from October 1946 until October 1947. In all there were nine *Länder* elections in this period: between them the CDU and the SPD took over 70 per cent of the total vote. That pattern has been reinforced subsequently but not essentially changed.

What is less easy to determine is the operative force behind the concentration. How far was it a natural development, and how far a consequence of occupation policies? There is a distinction to be made between 'social' and 'institutional' factors, the former reflecting the changes in German society and the latter, in the first instance, the product of occupation policies. While the precise reasons for the electorate behaving as it did in the first elections remain imponderable, the effect of allied intervention was decisive, both in determining the nature of party competition and (through 'licensing' and other discriminatory methods) in deciding who the

eligible contestants were to be. In all four zones of occupation the basic grouping of licensed parties was the same, although the exact labels differed. The four original parties, the SPD, the KPD, the CDU and the Free or Liberal Democrats, were admitted because of their generally 'democratic' and 'anti-Fascist' character, while others were rejected on these grounds. The most important aim was to discourage the setting up of extreme right-wing parties, but in the Western zones there was also a suspicion of any movement (such as the 'refugees') which could have a disruptive influence or lead to the creation of a fragmented multi-party system, an important consideration for the Americans and British who were naturally hostile to anything but a two-party system. For the purposes of allied control, it was also easier to work through a few large and 'responsible' parties.

Basically, then, a four-party model resulted, but the simplification really went even further: the constituent parties were 'bourgeois' (CDU and FDP) or 'socialist' (SPD and KPD), so that a two-bloc system was the outcome, and it was that format which survived in the opposition of the SPD to the CDU, once the KPD was removed and the FDP remained a minor party. The modest place taken by these last two shows that allied goodwill was by itself insufficient, but that does not weaken the case for arguing that there was an overall influence in favour of a clear socialist–bourgeois division.

The allied impact was profound, and it was compressed into a limited period, perhaps not much longer than three years. Other parties were later permitted to function: the Bavarian Party in 1946, the German Party in 1947. By 1948 a more relaxed view was evident as the creation of a West German state became a probability. As a result several parties were formed which had not contested *Land* elections but were in a position to fight the 1949 federal elections, and some – such as the *Deutsche Rechts-Partei* – were hardly to be counted as supporters of a democratic system. Their appearance, however, came too late to affect the composition of existing *Land* assemblies and governments, and by that time, too, the established parties had made their mark in the Economic Council and the constituent Parliamentary Council, setting the framework for a quasi-federal party system.

2 Apparent diffusion

The first impression of the Bundestag election of August 1949 is that the party system showed distinct similarities with the 'normal'

German type, a multi-party system which could easily take the direction of fragmentation. That reversion appeared possible, since there was a move away from the consolidation evident in the previous *Land* elections; in particular the combined vote of the CDU and SPD dropped noticeably. The number of parties represented in the first Bundestag (ten) was also much greater than had been the case for any of the individual *Länder*.

However, that first impression is misleading, to the extent that it implies a definite shift in electoral opinion. A growth in the number of parties was to be expected: some had only been able to form in time for the 1949 election; others had gained representation in some *Länder* but not in others and were able to win federal seats because the electoral law was at the outset particularly generous, only requiring that a party should gain 5 per cent of the vote in any one *Land* in order to qualify. Thus it came about that parties which were only of regional importance, such as the Bavarian Party, swelled the total number.

Despite the fall in the CDU and SPD share, their relative position was still exceptionally strong: only the FDP and the KPD secured more than 5 per cent of the federal vote. When the electoral law was tightened in 1953 to make the 5 per cent hurdle apply to a party's *federal* vote, the elimination of some very small parties was inevitable. Their transient presence obscured the real shape of the party system.

That shape was determined by the underlying bipolarity generated by the contest between the CDU and the SPD. The near parity of these two parties – both around the 30 per cent mark – is, however, also open to misinterpretation, if it is concluded that the narrowest of margins decided which of the two should win control over the Federal Republic, that it was a virtual toss-up between Adenauer and Schumacher. Currency is given to that idea by the somewhat dramatic way in which the former was elected chancellor by the bare one vote necessary to gain the necessary absolute majority, but that did not at all mean that almost half the Bundestag would have supported Schumacher. The truth was that the multi-party system already had a definitely lop-sided look: the bulk of the smaller parties were 'bourgeois', and some form of anti-socialist coalition was likely. Adenauer's coalition parties – the CDU–CSU, the German Party and the Free Democrats – represented one possible combination. The government actually

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