As we enter into a new decade, the year 2020 will be a decisive one for German party politics. Angela Merkel, now in her 15th year as German Chancellor, handed over the leadership of the Christian Democratic Union in December 2018 and will not seek re-election as head of government. While her party is struggling to find an adequate replacement, the coalition with the Social Democrats is instable at best and may not hold until the next scheduled federal elections in autumn 2021. Meanwhile, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Greens appear to be vying to become new 'Volksparteien'. It is a complex political situation in the year of the German EU Council Presidency.

This briefing outlines some of the key issues that are likely to shape German party politics on the federal and sub-federal levels in 2020 – and beyond. It follows up from the workshop “The Future of Party Politics – Insights from Germany” that was held in Birmingham in November 2019, supported by the Political Studies Association’s ‘Pushing the Boundaries’ scheme.

**Electoral Shifts**

The workshop participants first took stock of the recent shifts in the overall balance of power in German party politics: weakened ‘big’ parties, stronger ‘small’ parties, and the emergence of an altogether new party, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

On the national level, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) together with its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democrats (SPD) have long dominated the political scene as leaders of the centre-right and the centre-left, respectively.

Since 1949, there have only been four different coalition formations on the federal level (with more variety on the Ländere level): CDU/CSU and Liberals (FDP), SPD and FDP, SPD and Greens, and four grand coalitions of CDU/CSU and SPD. Three of these four grand coalitions have been led by Chancellor Merkel since 2005 – an indication of the recent struggle to form stable coalitions between parties on either side of the political spectrum, but also across it.

Following the elections in late 2017, the attempt to form the first federal ‘Jamaica’ coalition of CDU/CSU (33%), Greens (8.9%), and Liberals (10.7%) failed when the latter walked out of exploratory talks citing ‘lack of a common vision’.

The renewal of the grand coalition with the SPD (20.5%) was a temporary saving grace for political stability. In hindsight, it was another nail in the coffin of Germany’s oldest party, which is struggling to define its raison d’être in the 21st century. The nominal winner of the 2017 election, the CDU/CSU, is also increasingly challenged to assert its position as the ‘Chancellor Party’ under Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer’s leadership.

Meanwhile, the Green Party has gradually consolidated its strength and is now a governing party in 11 out of 16 Ländere parliaments in six different coalition constellations. The southern state of Baden-Württemberg made history when it elected the first Green Minister-President in 2011, Winfried Kretschmann. He has since comfortably ruled in a coalition with, first, the Social Democrats and now the Christian Democrats as junior partners.

The AfD has established itself firmly as a new opposition party. It is now represented in the Bundestag and all of the 16 state legislatures, coming second in each of the East German Ländere parliamentary elections since 2016 with between 20.8% and 27.5% of the vote.
The Left Party, while only taking 5th place in the Bundestag and remaining outside parliament altogether in six West German states, is still comparatively strong (especially) in the East. A junior partner in the Berlin and Bremen senates, it is currently struggling to find partners for a new government in Thuringia after the 2019 state elections.

Following the ‘Superwahljahr’ 2019, the city-state of Hamburg is the only one electing a new senate in 2020. In the current political climate, where feelings run high in the face of new challenges and opportunities, the mayoral and local council elections will also be monitored closely though.

**OLD AND NEW VOLKSPARTEIEN**

Against the background of these electoral shifts, the workshop participants discussed the (not so new) question on what grounds a party can make a legitimate claim to being a ‘Volkspartei’. In the German tradition, the term refers to a (mass) party that is able to address and integrate voters from different political, social, and economic milieus.

After the 2009 federal elections, Die Linke’s Gregor Gysi celebrated his party’s 12% vote share (+ 3.2%) and 16 direct mandates (in the East Länder) as its ‘breakthrough as a Volkspartei’. The SPD (like the AfD, who is only in its 8th year of existence) now consistently polls just above that mark – a fate it shares with many of its sister parties in Europe. 40 years after its establishment, the Greens are getting ready to position themselves as (West) Germany’s second biggest party (not only) as a result of the growing environmental movement.

Numbers (alone), then, do not seem to be a useful marker for what makes a ‘Volkspartei’ anymore. The AfD, in some ways the first “pan-German” party, has tried to maximise its electoral potential by politicising the very notion of the term ‘Volk’, the ‘people’, and its place in German democratic politics. Exploiting the democratic credentials of the ‘Wir sind das (ein) Volk’ slogan of the peaceful revolution in 1989, the AfD (joining forces with the PEGIDA movement) has revived an ethnic-cultural understanding of who ‘the people’ are – namely two things above all: white and non-Muslim. This is part of the explanation behind the AfD’s strong electoral base among Germany’s Russian (-speaking) population. Many Russian Germans left the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia (‘late resettlers’) to obtain German citizenship granted to them by the Federal Expellees Act. The AfD casts them as ‘good immigrants’ and seeks to attract their support by wooing them as ‘authentically German’.

While AfD voters come from across the political party spectrum or are previous non-voters, studies reveal that many of them are, indeed, middle-aged workers united in their negative attitudes towards immigration and their sceptical views of the state of German democracy. The post-Wende experiences of East Germans and comparatively high levels of (rural) deprivation reinforce these attitudes and views and contribute to the party’s results in this part of the country.

The Greens, meanwhile, still have trouble convincing voters in the more rural and less affluent parts of the country in both East and West of their (cost-intensive) policy ideas. The FDP is keen to win over skilled workers with a sense for self-responsibility and ambitions to climb the social ladder as it tries to move away from its reputation as a ‘business’ party. The CSU, rather uncharacteristically, has begun to develop progressive family policies, including more parental leave allowance for fathers, as part of a new electoral strategy.

Winning and losing elections is about more than (changes in) vote shares though, and this dimension of party politics appears to become increasingly important at a time when election winners face immense difficulties in putting together a coalition government. The East states of Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, and Brandenburg, for instance, are currently governed by a ‘Kenia’ coalition of CDU, SPD, and Greens, but their majorities reach no more than 56%.

A ‘Volkspartei’, finally, also relies on organisational resources, including an (active) membership and local presence – an area in which the ‘smaller’ parties (despite the Greens’ recent surge in membership, especially in the East) still lag behind the SPD and the CDU/CSU.
In light of these developments, the usefulness of the very concept of ‘Volkspartei’ in both theory and practice will continue to be subject to debate. Perhaps the following is a more useful guiding question: which party can best transport an image of Germany as a modern (and ‘normal’) country through innovative policy ideas in key areas such as immigration, welfare, climate, and healthcare?

**Polarisation: Too much or too little?**

Looking at these dynamics from the perspective of overall democratic stability, workshop participants analysed another key concept that is currently driving much of the debate in and about Germany: polarisation.

Some observers (‘anti-centrists’) argue that greater rapprochement of (what used to be) the centre-left (SPD and Greens) and the centre-right (CDU/CSU and FDP) is the key reason for the emergence of the AfD. To fill the ‘democratic void’ (symbolised by the grand coalition), it would be necessary to offer a ‘real choice’ to voters again based on clear left-wing and right-wing alternatives.

Others (‘centrists’), by contrast, see this convergence in the ‘middle’ as functioning as a cordon sanitaire against potential threats from the radical margins. They view coalitions between the SPD and Left Party on the one hand and between the CDU/CSU and AfD on the other hand as the worst possible scenario.

The 2019 parliamentary elections in Thuringia, however, gave a glimpse into a future in which such a scenario is the only mathematic possibility for the (formerly) ‘big’ parties to govern. Finishing in third place behind the Left Party and the AfD, several CDU (and CSU) members expressed their willingness to consider a coalition with, or a government tolerated by, the AfD as a ‘conservative’ (i.e., perfectly democratic) party – even with the notorious Björn Höcke at its helm. The federal leadership and a majority of CDU voters strongly rejected the move, pointing to the AfD’s populist and/or extremist features. This is a good example of the existing level of intra-party competition over this and other issues that often remains hidden from view.

In other cases, offering a ‘real choice’ may in fact lie in the convergence of the ‘centre’ with the ‘margins’. As 2019 drew to a close, former SPD deputy leader Ralf Stegner said he supported the fusion of his party with Die Linke ‘in the medium term’ to form a strong centre-left force. While Stegner found no support in his own party for the idea of a merger, there are both proponents and sceptics in the Left Party. In the latter group many are keen to strengthen the party’s profile instead by addressing voters that have, in their eyes, been ‘left behind’ by the SPD – for instance by putting a decidedly left-wing mark on new concepts of the welfare state that are yet to be developed.

**Tensions within Liberal Democracy**

Ultimately, neither radical convergence nor radical polarisation seem to hold the answer to the challenges facing representational democracy in Germany. Instead, the debate points to the political class’ ongoing struggle to deal adequately with core tensions in modern democratic systems, e.g. between voter preferences and power politics, between basic values and political pragmatism, between the need for stability and the need to be open to change. All of these dimensions cut across socio-economic (re-distribution, efficiency, and fairness) and socio-cultural (identity, values, and belongingness) issues, thus questioning the traditional parameters of the left/right classification system.

**Further Reading**


WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

Keynote Address

“A Different Kind of Democratic Crisis? Polarization and Party Politics in Germany”
Hans Kundnani, Chatham House, London

Panel 1

Lidia Gibadło, The Polish Institute of International Affairs Warsaw

“The Alternative für Deutschland’s Involvement in Germany’s Russian-language Press”
Philip Decker, University of Oxford

“How Do Subnational Elections Promote the Rise of Radical Right Parties in the National Arena?”
Ka Ming Chan, LMU Munich

Panel 2

Jim McConalogue, The Open University

“The Party in Control of Plenary Debates? The Case of Bundestag Debates on the Euro Crisis”
Caroline Bhattacharya, University of Helsinki

“How to Explain the Electoral Losses at the Centre in Germany and how to Avoid Them? The Case of the Social Democrat Party (SPD)”
Lothar Funk, University of Applied Sciences Dusseldorf

Panel 3

“Volksparteien’ – Sick Man or Strong Anchor in Times of Change?”
Isabelle-Christine Panreck, LSE

“The Electoral Geography of Die Linke on the 2017 Federal Election: Re-discovering the Mass Party?”
Petar Bankov, University of Glasgow

“The German Greens: Volkspartei, Bündnispartei or Opportunists?”
Chantal Sullivan-Thomsett, University of Leeds
