

Honecker's Revenge

The Enduring Legacy of German Unification in the 2005 Election

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At first glance, any analysis of contemporary Germany would seem to require only minimally thinking about the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). For most East Germans, life in the GDR is increasingly a distant memory and unification has been a resounding success. Whether judged by productivity growth, aggregate incomes, air and water quality, or political freedom, East Germans have benefited enormously from joining the united German state. East and West Germans share similar patterns of work and leisure, they are represented by the same trade unions and employer associations, and they divide their votes among the same palette of political parties. In fact, the shadow of the communist past appears so far removed that Erich Honecker, the former General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), is more likely today to be the object of quiet laughter or pity rather than fear or hatred.

Yet, a core lesson of Germany's federal election in September 2005 is that the communist past has in fact an enduring legacy in East Germany, a legacy that substantially shapes politics in unified Germany. Fifteen years after unification, the crucial difference in German politics still lies in the East. Indeed, at one level, the Bundestag election of September 2005 simply demonstrated, as did the 2002 result, the presence of an east-west divide in German party politics. As in 2002, any party that hopes to win at the federal level must perform well in the very different circumstances of the East.

But beyond observing that parties must win the "East" to capture the prize of national office, a particularly ironic and less frequently

noted feature of Germany's east-west electoral divide can explain what is perhaps the most puzzling outcome of the federal election of 2005: the failure of the two major parties to garner at least 70 percent of the vote for the first time since 1949. To some, the decay in Germany's party system indicated by the simultaneous fall in support for *both* major parties simply seems to be an aligning of German trends with those in other democracies, such as France, Canada, Italy, and Great Britain. Corruption scandals, the importance of the mass media as opposed to party organizations in mobilizing voters, disputes over welfare reform, and declining rates of unionization all, according to most accounts, have reduced the importance of political parties in established democracies.¹ The latest developments in Germany, so the argument goes, are part of a broader trend, reflected in public opinion beginning in the 1970s and fortified by the breakthrough of the Greens in the 1980s, in which Germany is no longer so different from other advanced democracies.

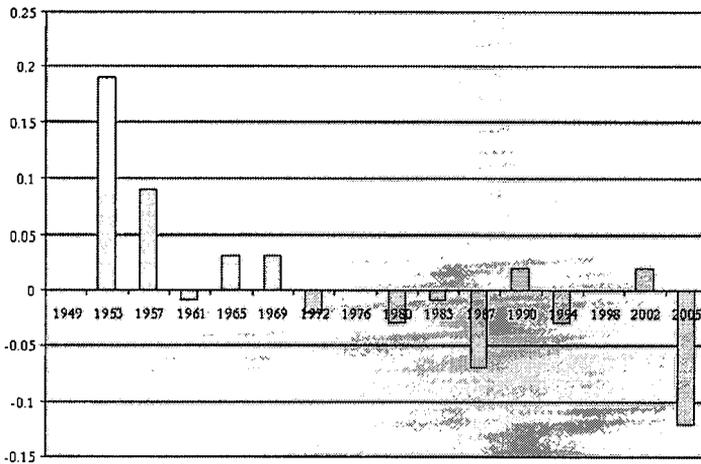
As compelling as this logic is, our article offers an alternative argument: the decay in Germany's party system reflected in the decline in support for both major parties is a direct outgrowth of German unification in 1989-90. Absent unification, Germany's previously robust party system would have remained entirely intact. Decisive in this regard is the presence of two distinctive but now overlapping electorates. One electorate was produced by fifty years of capitalism and the other by fifty years of communism. In arguing this we build on the work of Herbert Kitschelt who first identified this pattern in a seminal article forecasting postcommunist party systems.² For Kitschelt, the central question was whether party systems in the postcommunist world would be more or less "coherent" (defined as a system of clearly articulated party positions). The case of unified Germany suggests that two party systems that are coherent in different ways can, in combination, produce decay when unified.

In what follows, we first place the changes in Germany's party system in cross-national perspective. We then propose the argument that Germany's party system decay is a direct result of the 1989-90 unification and the long term legacy of the communist experience in East Germany. In the final part of this article, we reflect on the broader significance of our argument for German politics.

The Decay of Germany's Party System: Evidence and Existing Explanations

In the federal parliamentary elections of 2005, the two largest parliamentary groupings, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), failed jointly to receive 70 percent of the vote for the first time since 1949. Why is this simultaneous decline of the two major parties at the center of the Germany party system so surprising and important? When viewed in historical and comparative perspective, it is arguable that the decline of Germany's two leading parties is an indicator of larger problems in the party system itself. First, since the 1950s, West Germany's party system has been one marked by unusual stability, continuity, and high degrees of institutionalization. As Figure One indicates, the so-called "two-and-half party system" (CDU/CSU, SPD, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP)) emerged in the 1950s via an unprecedented *concentration* of political competition in which smaller parties were eliminated, the seat share of the two leading parties grew rapidly, and a nearly bipolar party system was established.

Figure 1: Percentage Change in SPD and CDU/CSU's Total Share of Seats from Previous Election



Source: Bundeswahlleiter, 2005

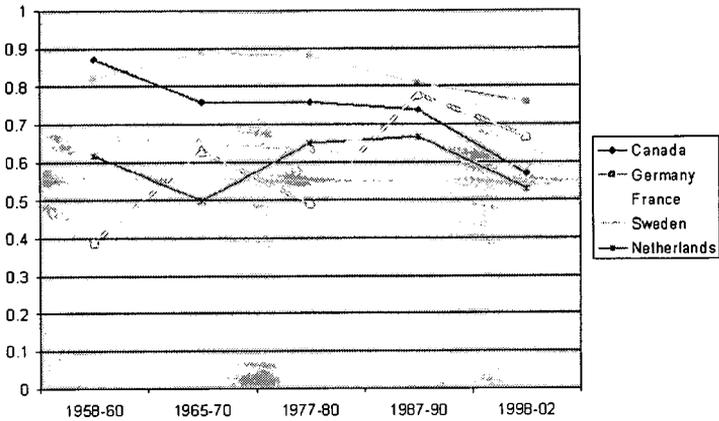
The concentration of the party system into two major parties was one of the hallmarks of democratic consolidation and was the result of a series of fusions on the Right (between catholic and conservative parties) and on the Left, indicating that the historical legacy of Weimar—to the surprise of many of the participants themselves—could be overcome.³ As Figure One also demonstrates, during the 1980s, the trend towards ever-greater concentration was undermined by the emergence of the Greens on the electoral stage. Yet, despite the appearance of the new Green party on the scene, the biggest single drop-off in support for the two major parties occurred in 2005, a moment when no new major party, except for the renamed Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)/Left coalition—had appeared on the scene. In short, the most precipitous decline of Germany's two main parties in postwar history occurred in the absence of a serious electoral threat, making the election of 2005 historically unprecedented.

But does this simply bring Germany in line with other advanced democracies, marking Germany's transition to a "normal" democracy? Indeed, at first glance, this appears to be the case. When viewed comparatively, West Germany's party system has been unusually stable among advanced democratic states. Whether measured in terms of electoral volatility, voter turnout, or the institutionalization of the parties themselves, Germany's party system has been consistently stable and marked by high levels of continuity. In the wake of Weimar and the failure of democracy in the interwar period, that Germany's two leading parties could consistently garner such a major proportion of the vote was taken to be a major indicator of political success. In Figure Two, we see when viewed in cross-national perspective, across the entire postwar period, the two leading parties in Germany consistently received a major share of the vote, outperforming similar democratic states.

Moreover, it is likely Figure Two in fact understates the stability of the German party system. Whereas those that counted as the "leading parties" changed in Sweden, the Netherlands, France, and Canada, the same two parties—the CDU/CSU and the SPD—were always on the scene in Germany.

The comparative data might simply be telling us that Germany's party system is converging with other democracies, succumbing to similar pressures of party system decay. But such an argument does

Figure 2: Share of Votes Received by Two-Top Scoring Parties in Parliamentary Elections, Late 1950s-Late 1990s



Source: Lijphart Electoral Archive, 2005

not tell us precisely why this is happening. In addition, there is evidence that strongly suggests that Germany's particularly robust parties would have remained intact had it not been for unification. For one thing, Germany's major parties had survived scandals that had decimated similar parties in other contexts. In this regard, it is worth comparing the impact of two revealingly analogous corruption scandals on the Christian Democrats in Italy and Germany. Both came to light immediately after the end of the Cold War and both involved the intersection of private money, public contracts, and the financing of political parties. Whereas the Italian Christian Democrats were wiped out electorally by these scandals, the most that can be said for their impact on the CDU is that, after the humiliation of a several old party stalwarts, such as Helmut Kohl and Wolfgang Schäuble, it moved into respectable opposition.⁴

The Christian Democrats were also able to survive the move of the Social Democrats to the center of the political spectrum during the 1990s. Here the interesting comparison is with the British conservatives, who were crippled by Tony Blair's deft movement away from the Left. To this day, Conservatives have yet to find a viable ideological alternative and remain in disarray. By contrast, the CDU

when confronted with a similar though perhaps less emphatic move to the center by former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's SPD, stood by its position at the center of Germany's political spectrum, did not engage in self-destructive internal infighting over the fundamental direction of the party (this, despite keen competition among the provincial party bosses for control of the party), and remained poised to take back power when the SPD faltered.

Although reeling from its loss in the current election, there is no sign that the Social Democrats are ready to self-destruct. They, too, remain ready to capture a large swath of votes should another election be called. What is disorganizing German party politics is not a decreasing coherence of internal party organization. Rather it is the unwillingness of German voters to vote for either of these two parties in large enough numbers to grant either of them governing status with parties that are ideologically close enough to enact coherent public policies.

The East-West Divide

What then has driven German's party system into relative disarray? Our central argument is that there is a fundamental *disjuncture* between Germany's party system and its electorate. While party systems may not be "frozen," as Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan long ago argued, they do reflect the cleavages out of which they develop.⁵ As a result, it is not surprising that the contemporary German party system reflects postwar West German society and only awkwardly fits the context of a unified Germany. In other words, taken as a whole, Germany's electorate is deeply divided between East and West; the failure of the leading parties to sustain their nearly oligopolistic support reflects this new reality. Consider the final results of the 2005 election broken down between East and West, as seen in Table One below

What these numbers reveal is that had West Germany been on its own, a stable and familiar CDU-FDP coalition would have been possible, with an equally plausible Red-Green alternative waiting in the wings. The Left Party would not have crossed the 5 percent threshold. From the standpoint of politics, things would be very much "the way they used to be" in pre-1989 West Germany. In the East, on the other

Table 1: Election Results in West and East Germany 2005

West German Election Results, 2005	East German Election Results, 2005
SPD: 35.1%	SPD: 30.5%
CDU: 37.5%	CDU: 25.3%
Greens: 8.8%	Greens: 5.1%
FDP: 10.2%	Left Party: 25.4%
Left: 4.9%	Others: 5.8%
Others: 3.5%	

Source: Bundeswahlleiter, 2005

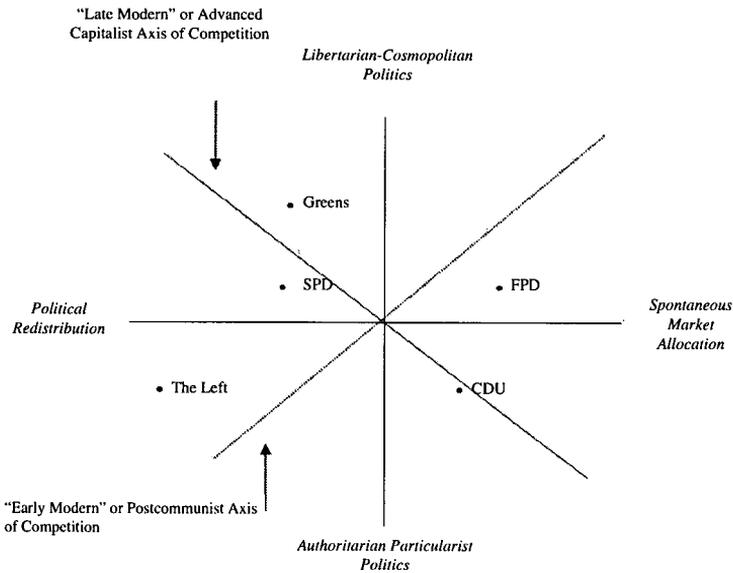
hand, neither the CDU nor the SPD could have constructed a viable coalition without the presence of the Left Party which actually outperformed the CDU—a reality totally unfamiliar in the history of Western Germany. Whereas in the West, the most stable coalition would have been a bourgeois dominated CDU-FDP, in the East the most stable coalition would have been a “red-red,” SPD-Left Party dominated government. In other words, the two parts of Germany each have the potential for a coherent party system but taken together they do not. What is the basis for these two distinctive party systems?

Two Underlying Social Structures

In his work on party systems, Herbert Kitschelt identifies two primary cleavages that drive party politics. As summarized in Figure Three below, one cleavage concerns the preferred mode of the distribution of resources in society. Citizens either prefer markets or state distribution of resources. The second cleavage concerns a narrow or broader notion of citizenship. Citizens either prefer a liberal-cosmopolitan or a strong conservative-particularist orientation to political membership.

In the transition to capitalism, those favoring market modes of resource distribution find affinity with those oriented toward liberal-cosmopolitan orientations to membership and authority. Those favoring state redistribution, such as the Tory socialists, also tended to be conservative and even particularist in their notions of citizenship. In this type of polity, though voters are generally distributed along the “early modern” axis of competition, Kitschelt argues that the bulk of voters are found in the lower left quadrant. In advanced

Figure 3: Structuring Cleavages in Advanced Democracies and Post-communist Democracies



capitalist societies, by contrast, the primary cleavage structure shifts; as capitalism becomes the status quo, those favoring market modes of resource distribution become more conservative and particularist in political orientation and those favoring state-redistribution, such as social democrats, articulate more inclusive conceptions of political membership and cultural policy. Though voters are located along the "late modern" axis of competition in this type of polity, the bulk of voters are now found in the upper-left quadrant.

Kitschelt's model is a simple one in which social structure determines cleavage structures. But the argument does point to a sharp electoral dilemma facing Germany's leading political parties. On the one hand, it is the latter, developed capitalist form of cleavage structure that was characteristic of most of Western Europe, including West Germany in 1989 and today. It is thus not surprising that the western-based parties that developed their ideologies in this context today still find themselves along this "late modern" cleavage. Based on the parties' stances taken during the 2005 campaign, Figure Three places the main German political parties along the two

ideological dimensions.⁶ Since political parties are not infinitely flexible and are constrained by their past positions, that the major German political parties remain largely along a West German cleavage makes sense. Moreover, what is striking is that when one looks at the 2005 campaign, one sees clearly the failure of FDP and Greens as well as—to a lesser extent the CDU and SPD—to move away effectively from this cleavage to mobilize eastern voters.

By contrast, as Kitschelt argues, the nature of early postcommunist social structures, as found in East Germany and the rest of Eastern Europe, was much more akin to that of the early capitalist era than that found in contemporary Western Europe. As we see in Figure Three, it is the Left Party—rooted in the East—that finds itself along this “early modern” axis, and as a result, outperforms all the western parties in the East with the exception of the SPD. But, two crucial questions remain: first, why did it take so long after 1990 for the distinctive eastern cleavage to emerge? And, second, what is the structural basis of Eastern distinctiveness? With regards to the first question, as a recent study by Kai Arzheimer and Jürgen Falter⁷ argue, the East-West electoral divide is not so new and has, in fact, been present throughout the 1990s, characterized by three persistent attributes: lower voter turn-out, greater electoral volatility, and a gradual rejection of western parties. While the frenzied unification period of 1990 may have resulted in support for the CDU, the PDS/Left Party has been making consistent gains ever since. In that sense, the electoral behavior of eastern voters has differentiated them from western voters since 1990. Though the divide is deep and persistent, it is in 2005 that the two party systems have most clearly manifested themselves.

A second important question is the following: What is the basis of this distinctive cleavage in the East? Broadly speaking, as economic historians of East Germany have noted pointedly, capitalism and industrialism are very different.⁸ Although East Germany was by Western standards over-industrialized, on the eve of its transition to capitalism, it completely lacked a capitalist middle class. Much of the human capital geared toward success in a communist economy was devalued overnight because of the rapidity of the transition. West German production could easily cover existing East German demand, and wages in the East outpaced productivity growth, ensuring that private investment remained low even when the infusion of

public funds remained high. The result was a largely stagnant social structure that much more resembled the "early modern" than the "late modern" model. Unlike the other countries of postcommunist Europe, which were forced overnight to develop their native capitalist classes, this was not the case in East Germany. It is not surprising then that the prevailing moral economy and political orientations of the communist period should have hung on with a tenacity in East Germany that exceeded their postcommunist neighbors in either Poland or the Czech Republic.

The strength of the divergent orientations on economic and cultural issues between East and West Germans has been demonstrated convincingly and repeatedly by survey researchers. On cultural issues, as is the case in other postcommunist contexts, East Germans are systematically less religious and less cosmopolitan than their West German counterparts.⁹ On the question of preferences for different modes of resource distribution, Alberto Alesina and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln show in an exhaustive study of household panel data from East and West Germany, using a wide range of control variables, that living under communist institutions has rendered East Germans much more favorable to redistribution and state intervention in the economy than West Germans.¹⁰ These findings remain robust even when controlling for economic position and incentives. Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln find that although the fifteen years since unification have witnessed change in East German economic preferences, this change is taking place very gradually. Based on current trends, they calculate that it will take between one and two generations for East and West German preferences to converge completely.

Seen in terms of Kitschelt's model, while East Germans have quickly and easily come to develop a party system with the same palette of political parties as in the West, the East German social structure and its underlying values have generated a political cleavage structure that is much more in line with the early modern than the late modern period. The result, therefore, is an overall party system that is coherent in the West and coherent in the East but incoherent as a whole when combined into one country.

The strategic consequence for political parties confronting this split electorate is that they face a series of dilemmas: electoral appeals directed to western voters offend eastern voters, as only

most prominently seen in the missteps of figures such as the Bavarian Minister President Edmund Stoiber whose populist appeals to Westerners inevitably offended East Germans. Conversely, electoral messages aimed to mobilize eastern voters fail to excite western voters. Small parties have dealt with the dilemma in a sensible fashion: the FDP and Greens appeal to Western voters and largely make no effort at mass appeal in the East, receiving together less than 8 percent of the vote in the new Länder. Similarly, the Left/former PDS, despite Oskar Lafontaine's efforts to broaden the appeal of the party, failed to make any headway in the West. Indeed, the Left Party felt so constrained that they had to draw upon a second "tenor," East German stalwart Gregor Gysi, in order to conduct a second campaign, as it were, in the East. As the SPD and the CDU/CSU pursue their national ambitions, they find they are stuck on the horns of a dilemma that has weakened the core of Germany's party system.

Conclusion

As Gerhard Schröder exited the unusually tumultuous political stage in the fall of 2005, one fact was clear—the normally highly composed world of German party politics had become quite a messy affair. Pundits excitedly discussed the possibility of such exotic governing coalitions as the so-called "Jamaica Coalition" of Greens, CDU, and Liberals (FDP), or the possibility of a "Traffic Light Coalition" of SPD, Greens, and FDP. Unusual in German postwar history, this jumbled state of affairs that generated a grand coalition will not simply dissolve under the apparently stable partnership of the two largest parties in Germany. Rather, German politics has become fundamentally more complex, reflecting a new postunification political reality that has taken fifteen years for analysts and politicians to recognize. The disjuncture of a party system created in postwar West Germany and an electorate created in a divided Germany is a phenomenon that will shape German politics in important and possibly unanticipated ways.

Nevertheless, we can ask: what are the most important potential implications of "Honecker's revenge" for German politics? First and most immediately, Germany's leading parties must come to terms

with the new electoral reality facing them. Just as the "South" has shaped a generation of Republican-Democratic Party battles in the United States, the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats must develop electoral strategies that effectively manage the East-West electoral divide. It was, after all, the U.S. Republican Party's effective deployment of a "Southern strategy" beginning in the early 1970s that has generated that party's domination of American politics for nearly a generation. Whichever party—CDU or SPD—can adopt a compelling "eastern" strategy might find itself in a similar position. Although after 1949 the Federal Republic pursued an aggressive strategy of creating a rough material equality between various *Länder*, changing international economic conditions and the unmanageable costs of unification indicate that the post-1989 Berlin Republic will in one respect return Germany to its prewar condition: a country of marked regional economic disparities. This transformation of one important feature of West Germany by the act of unification will have long-term consequences for party politics.

The second implication of "Honecker's revenge" for German politics is that it is unclear whether the "solution" settled upon for the time being—a grand coalition—will deal effectively with the divide. Even though Germans have elected their first Eastern (and female) chancellor, the current grand coalition seems as much of a holding action to preserve what is left of the party system of the Bonn Republic as it is an adaptation to the conditions of the Berlin Republic. Neither the Greens, nor the FDP, nor the Left Party/PDS constitute opposition parties that most Germans feel could rule the country reasonably. Germany is thus left in a grand coalition without a "shadow cabinet" or an opposition that the broad public could turn to should the CDU-SPD government falter. Seen in this way, Germany's current grand coalition will suffer from the same weaknesses as all "consociational" arrangements in which most large interest groups are included in the spoils arising from the division of power.

The final implication of "Honecker's revenge" is that compared to its eastern neighbors, East Germany's initial "comparative advantages" that included a generous western "sponsor" may turn out to hinder the political and economic transitions that have been homegrown and hence more successful in countries like the Czech Republic and Poland. From the standpoint of development economics,

East Germany is now saddled with high wages, lagging productivity, and low levels of private investment. The postcommunist countries bordering Germany, by contrast, as full members of the European Union have benefited from their low wages and (comparatively) low taxes within a highly competitive and integrated continental market. Sixteen years after unification, it appears obvious to most Germans, East and West, that no amount of public transfers from the West to the East will succeed in kick-starting the East German economy in the way that has already occurred in Germany's East-Central European neighbors.

Even more important than the economic advantages of backwardness, however, is the sense of "ownership" that Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians have over their postcommunist transformations, something completely lacking in East Germany. For all of the missteps and failures of the postcommunist transition in East-Central Europe, the citizens of these countries can still plausibly tell themselves that what happened in 1989 was a restoration of popular sovereignty. Even the choice to join the European Union was not experienced as a loss of control over their collective fates but as a choice for Europe. In Germany, by contrast, half way through the second decade after unification, most East Germans, even the majority who still believe that there was no alternative to a single Germany, have not regained a sense of control over their lives. Honecker's revenge is the reflection of this sustained collective sense of difference in the still divided party landscape of united Germany.

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Notes

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4. For an account of the dynamics of adaptation inside the CDU after the fall of Kohl, see Ludger Helms "Is there Life after Kohl? The CDU Crisis and the Future of Party Democracy in Germany," *Government and Opposition*, 35, no.2 (2000): 419-438. It is of course worth noting that between Italy and Germany there were important differences in the nature and scope of the political scandals as well as public expectations of acceptable behavior. Nevertheless, that the CDU survived its own crisis essentially unscathed points to the durability of the German party system.
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