

INTRODUCTION

Merkel's Nachsommermärchen?

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Not once during the campaign—or actually over the whole course of the seventeenth Bundestag (2009-2013)—was it ever really in doubt that Angela Merkel would continue as chancellor after the 22 September 2013 parliamentary election. Despite the vicissitudes of governing for eight years, most in the midst of the financial and Euro crisis, she has achieved and sustained some of the highest approval ratings of any postwar German politician. Voters trust Merkel as a good manager of the economy and an honest steward and defender of German interests in Europe. Her carefully cultivated image as a steady, reassuring, and incorruptible leader, coupled with her political acumen, ideological flexibility and, at times, ruthlessness—captured in the dueling monikers of Mutti Merkel and Merkelavelli¹—are the keys to her profound success.

She is the first female chancellor, the most powerful woman in the world, and the fifth most powerful person overall.² She is the third-longest serving chancellor (behind fellow Christian Democrats Helmut Kohl with sixteen years in power and Konrad Adenauer with fourteen) and, currently, she is the longest serving head of government in the European Union. Even more importantly, in the summer, soccer fan Merkel will experience the national soccer team's third attempt to win the World Cup under her tenure (third time lucky?). She has presided over a prolonged export boom, resulting in record-setting current account surplus of over 7 percent in early 2014.³ Economic performance has been solid, especially compared to EU partners, many of which are in recession—German GDP grew by 3.9 percent in 2010, 3.4 percent in 2011, 0.9 percent in 2012, 0.5 percent in 2013 and is predicted to increase by 1.7 percent in 2014 and 2.0 percent in 2015.⁴ Public finances are sound with the debt burden returning to around 80 percent of



GDP and the deficit at -0.1 percent in 2013, following a budget surplus of 0.1 percent in 2012.

Table 1: German Economic Performance, 2009-2015

Year	GDP Growth Rate (%)	Budget Deficit/Surplus (% GDP)	Public Debt (% GDP)	Unemployment Rate (harmonized)
2009	-5.1	-3.1	77.5	7.8
2010	3.9	-4.2	86.3	7.1
2011	3.4	-0.8	85.8	6.0
2012	0.9	0.1	88.3	5.5
2013	0.5	-0.1*	86.1	5.3
2014	1.7	0.2	83.4	4.7**
2015	2.0	0.6	80.9	

Source: <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics>.

* The OECD has a 0.1 % surplus for 2013, but official figures now record a slight deficit. See <http://www.dw.de/german-economic-growth-flat-in-2013-but-deficit-under-control/a-17362284>.

** projected; <http://www.oecd.org/employment/unemployment-set-to-remain-high-in-oecd-countries-through-2014-youth-and-low-skilled-hit-hardest.htm>; accessed 27 February 2014.

In light of French stagnation, Italian dysfunction, and British withdrawal from Europe, Merkel has overseen an unprecedented rise of German influence and power in the European Union and beyond. Moreover, the so-called German model, in disgrace by the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, has been rehabilitated. Countries around the world—including the United States—have grown to admire the German system and are even trying to emulate parts of it.⁵ It is truly Merkel's Republic today, dare one say, Merkel's Europe.

Not surprising, therefore, was the resounding victory of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU or the Union parties) in the 2013 Bundestag election. In fact, her victory was so decisive that her party came within a handful of seats of achieving an absolute majority—a feat only achieved once in postwar Germany by Konrad Adenauer in 1957 at the height of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. As much as Merkel's re-election was seemingly overdetermined, election night did generate several surprises, most notably the failure of the Liberals (Free Democratic Party, FDP)—the junior coalition partner since 2009—to surpass the 5 percent electoral threshold. They will not be represented in parliament for the first time since 1949. This outcome also necessitated a new coalitional partner for Merkel, which, as expected, turned out to be the Social Democrats (SPD). Yet another grand coalition (after experiences from 1966-1969 and 2005-2009) was negotiated—replete with a detailed 185-page coalition agreement⁶—sworn in almost three months after the election on 17 December 2013.

In light of the importance of Germany in European and global politics today, and the current resonance of the German system abroad, this two-part special issue of *German Politics and Society* is devoted to the 2013 Bundestag election. The contributions assembled below delve into a variety of salient issues, including the campaign, partisan politics, issues of representation, government formation, and domestic and foreign policies. It is hoped that the reader will gain a fuller understanding of the German political situation, as well as some insight into what one might expect looking into the future. Merkel is at the pinnacle of her power, but her era will most likely come to a close over the next four years. Who and what comes next? Moreover, despite the outward signs of success, many challenges have festered underneath the surface—problems that will eventually emerge and demand action. In a few short years, Merkel might very well paraphrase the apocryphal words of France’s Louis XV: “après moi le deluge.” At the least, her stunning electoral triumph, her *Herbstmärchen* (autumn fairytale), may turn out to be much more ephemeral, a *Nachsommermärchen* (Indian Summer fairytale).

The Campaign

The consensus inside and outside of the country was that the 2013 election campaign was one of the most boring and inconsequential ever—even more so than 2009, which was memorably likened to “a city council race in Würzburg.”⁷ Observers widely lamented that the big, existential issues that Germany faces were not addressed—rising income inequality, stagnant wages, widespread “precarity,” crumbling infrastructure, and lack of domestic investment. This is not even to mention deeper structural issues such as the aging of the population, immigration and integration issues and, of course, the specter of the simmering Euro crisis. But then, certain highbrow types always think there should be much more thoughtful debate about a political system’s challenges in some kind of fantasy Habermasian public sphere. Yet, even by more realistic standards, very little of substance was discussed either during the six “hot” weeks of the campaign or in the months preceding this phase.

Each party had a substantial enough electoral platform—with the center-right parties resisting tax increases and more European oversight of the economy and banking sector, the center-left and left parties advocating higher taxes and more supranational oversight, and everyone seemingly concerned about educational outcomes, affordable housing, and noise (*Lärmschutz*).⁸ Only a few issues appeared to gain any kind of traction: proposals for a

minimum wage, plans to address rising rents in many cities, lowering the retirement age, a potential toll for foreign cars on Autobahns, or financing more daycare places. There was only one televised debate on 1 September between Merkel and her Social Democratic challenger (Peer Steinbrück), the so-called *Kanzlerduell*—and another one for the top candidates of the other, smaller parties. Even this failed to generate much drama, although Merkel (Greece never should have been let into the Eurozone) and her opponent (the banks are responsible for the Euro crisis and should be held accountable) landed a few punches. The story of that event was the smart-alecky behavior of the comedian Stefan Raab (TV total) who was one of the moderators—as well as the presumably patriotic necklace that Merkel wore—the so-called *Schlandkette*, which even generated its own Twitter account.⁹

Pundits largely blamed Merkel and her party for this state of affairs. The CDU's campaign was centered almost completely on the figure of the *Kanzlerin*. Campaign posters veritably fetishized Merkel, with outsized photos of her, and more often (especially in the much derided three-story advertisement near the main train station in Berlin) simply depicting her hands in her famous, rhombus-shaped (*Raute*) gesture—"Maxima Merkel" as *Der Spiegel* put it.¹⁰ Slogans were simple—"gemeinsam erfolgreich" (successful together); "damit Angela Merkel Kanzlerin bleibt" (so that Angela Merkel remains chancellor); "Cool bleiben und Kanzlerin wählen" (stay calm and vote for the chancellor)—perhaps summarized simply by "weiter so" (more, onwards, forward), or "Angie." As Merkel put it at the end of the *Kanzlerduell*—you know me, you trust me, let's continue. This encapsulates Merkel's appeal—no drama, trustworthiness, sound management, studiousness, and hard work.

Many commented that it was a classic Christian Democratic campaign strategy dating back to the Adenauer era—"keine Experimente" (no experiments)—that resonated deeply with an older, conservative German electorate that is deeply satisfied with its prosperity and economic achievements, as well as a little proud, even smug that Germans have been doing so well despite the misery from the financial and Euro crisis surrounding them. Indeed, unemployment has been at an almost historic low, youth unemployment is negligible—under 10 percent, versus an EU average of 23 percent and over 50 percent in Greece and Spain—and taxes have not risen.¹¹ Berlin is finally booming for the first time really since before 1945, nation-wide growth is projected to accelerate in 2014 and 2015, and even Eastern Germany is doing reasonably well.¹² The Union would not have benefited from a deeper debate about issues. Merkel basically had to show up and smile—or show her hands—and that is exactly what she did.

Not everyone has been completely taken in by Merkel's appeal. She is likened to a "schwäbische Hausfrau"—a hard-working, thrifty, perhaps stingy, southern German housewife. Guido Westerwelle was the first of many to refer to her as "*Mutti*"—mommy—although I always thought she more resembles a "*Tante*" (aunt)—reassuring, supportive, but also at times patronizing, and even a bit suffocating. More negative is the "Merkelavelli" description, pointing to how well, even ruthlessly, she has played the dirtier game of politics behind the scenes, outmaneuvering enemies and friends, co-opting others' positions, and eliminating rivals. Of course, outside of Germany there is a legion of criticism, especially from the "peripheral" economies that have been in a depression for years now (blamed on Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble). Images of Merkel depicted with a Hitler moustache or Nazi uniform have been rather ubiquitous in Greece, Italy, and Spain. No longer confined to extreme fringes on the left and right, even mainstream publications like the *New Statesman* have asserted that Merkel is the most dangerous person in Europe since Hitler with her austerity doctrines.¹³ The February 2014 issue of *Harper's* had a cover of a Nazi uniform with the swastika replaced by a Euro symbol over the headline "How Germany Reconquered Europe: The Euro and its Discontents."¹⁴ The French have long deemed her "Madame Non" and the British love to compare her to their divisive "iron lady" Margaret Thatcher.

Less explosively, others have pointed out that "Merkelism" is a tactic of demobilization and depoliticization—consisting of vacuous platitudes, small-step pragmatism, content-less pronouncements, and now a healthy dose of personality cult/hero worship. Some highbrows feel that German public and democratic culture is being irrevocably damaged or that such wishy-washy slogans will prompt—or with the rise of the anti-Euro *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD) have already prompted—a more extremist ideological reaction. Merkel is criticized for having no grand vision, of being ideologically amorphous, tacking left or right, appropriating seemingly resonant policies (*Energiewende*)—self-interestedly sucking the profile and energy from all competitors and partners—first the SPD and then the FDP. It was rumored that despite a degree of ideological convergence, the Greens would not seriously contemplate joining a coalition as long as Merkel is in power, precisely because they fear being co-opted and strangled by her opportunistic embrace.

Given Merkel's unassailable position in the pre-election polls, it almost seemed as if the other parties had given up before they even started. Indeed, their campaigns ranged from lackluster to mediocre, and even shambolic. The Greens could not really recover from a bizarre scandal about permissive attitudes towards pedophilia that were aired or endorsed decades ago by

some prominent party members such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Volker Beck.¹⁵ They also had environmentally friendly campaign posters that quickly disintegrated in wind and rain—interpreted as a symbol of their campaign missteps.¹⁶ More generally, despite pervasive support for an environmentalist agenda among the German electorate, there is also widespread unease about spiking energy prices and the perverse effects of subsidies for green energy.

The SPD's campaign seemed cautious and predictable, stressing the minimum wage, lower rents, and vague calls for more social justice. Their slogans surrounding “Wir,” (we) “Das WIR entscheidet” (the we decides) were widely panned as vague and undifferentiated from the other parties.¹⁷ But then, the most prominent leaders—Peer Steinbrück, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Sigmar Gabriel—had to be careful as many of them were in government during the Red-Green coalition from 1998-2005 or with Merkel from 2005-2009 and thus share some responsibility for current policies, a point Merkel gleefully hammered home during the televised debate. The party thought it might be able to achieve a breakthrough with the choice of Steinbrück (finance minister from 2005-2009) as their chancellor candidate—considered a witty, straight-talker, but also a bit of a loose cannon. His candidacy never took off and there were some missteps—such as reports about the fees he had received for speeches, complaining about the chancellor receiving inadequate pay, or deriding cheap wine that he presumably would never touch, expressing a kind of effete elitism at odds with the traditional culture of the oldest working class party in the world, which, incidentally, celebrated its one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary in 2013. In an act of seeming desperation, he posed for a controversial magazine cover in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, smirking and giving the *Stinkefinger* (the middle finger) to the camera.

The FDP was almost invisible, had vacuous slogans—“die Mitte entlassen” (relieve the middle), “damit Deutschland stark bleibt” (so that Germany remains strong)—and made an amateurish, last-ditch “second vote” effort, which Merkel assiduously blocked. The party clearly saw the writing on the wall and barely tried to campaign. The Left Party used virtually the same slogans as they always have, recycled from the late nineteenth century—“Miete und Energie: bezahlbar für alle” (Rent and energy: affordable for all), “100% sozial,” “Teilen macht Spass: Millionärsteuer” (sharing is fun: millionaire tax). The insurgent anti-Euro AfD had quite the presence—apparently benefiting from a surge of private donations. “Mut zur Wahrheit: Der Euro ruiniert Europa! Auch uns!” (Courage for the Truth: The Euro is ruining Europe! Us too!); “Der deutsche Frühling beginnt im Herbst” (the German spring begins in autumn); “Griechen leiden. Deutsche zahlen. Banken kassieren,” (Greeks suffer. Germans pay. Banks cash in); and “Einwan-

derung braucht strikte Regeln” (immigration requires strict rules). The right-radical NPD also caused controversy with its xenophobic posters—“Maria statt scharia” (Maria [depicted as a blonde woman] instead of sharia [with a woman wearing the niqab]); or “Geld für die Oma statt Sinti und Roma” (money for grandma, instead of Sinti and Roma).

Results

In contrast to the campaign, election night was rather dramatic or at least surprising. With 41.5 percent of the second votes, the 311 CDU/CSU seats came within five seats of an absolute majority. This was an unexpectedly decisive victory for Merkel—the headlines the next day proclaimed—rightfully—the Merkel Republic. This was her achievement and her triumph. She is the only European leader to have been re-elected (twice) since the beginnings of the financial and Euro crises in 2008. Amidst the jubilation at the Konrad Adenauer Haus in the Tiergarten on election night, Merkel was typically humble, although visibly happy, thanking her team and already looking forward to the task of forming a new governing coalition.

Table 2: Bundestag Election Results, 2013 and 2009

	2013 Percent Second Vote	Seats	Percent Seats	2009 Percent Second Vote	Seats	Percent Seats	Percent Change (2013 from 2009)
CDU/CSU	41.5	311	49.4	33.8	239	38.4	+7.7
SPD	25.7	192	30.5	23.0	146	23.5	+2.7
FDP	4.8	-	-	14.6	93	15.0	-9.8
Greens	8.4	63	10.0	10.7	68	10.9	-2.5
Left	8.6	64	10.2	11.9	76	12.2	-3.3
AfD	4.7	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	6.2	-	-	6.0	-	-	-
All < 5 percent	15.7			6.0			9.7

Source: http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_13/index.html

The FDP had an apocalyptic evening. The party and its leaders were hapless in government, seemingly unable to come through on any of their 2009 campaign promises. The Liberals were also plagued by their leaders’ missteps, especially Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and party leader Philipp Rösler, who were also constantly outmaneuvered by Merkel, who alone was able to claim credit for and benefit from the economy’s strong performance after 2010. On election night, the FDP garnered only 4.8 percent of the vote, almost 10 percent less than in 2009, coming in below the

all-important 5 percent threshold for being eligible for seats. Thus, for the first time since the Federal Republic was formed, the FDP lacks representation in the eighteenth Bundestag and its market liberal profile will not be heard. The atmosphere at their campaign night event was funereal and the purge of top leaders (Rösler, Rainer Brüderle) started the next morning. All party hopes are now placed on thirty-five year-old Christian Linder from North Rhine Westphalia who became the new party chairman in December 2013. The Union parties gained 2 million second votes from the FDP—other supporters stayed at home or defected to the insurgent AfD. Interestingly, all pollsters had the Liberals over the 5 percent threshold in the weeks before the election—and they were rather defensive after the fact about their erroneous predictions, noting that the actual result was “within the margin of error.” By early 2014, the party was still hovering in the 4-5 percent range, although it is predicted to recover, probably in time for the elections to the European Parliament in May.

Assessments of the SPD’s performance depended on the eye of the beholder. Some journalists spoke of the “second worst electoral result in the party’s history,”¹⁸ with 2009 being the nadir. Others saw improvement. The party did marginally better than 2009—increasing its share of second votes by 2.7 percent to 25.7 percent. Yet even the party faithful saw this as a lackluster result. The heartiest cheering at the SPD election night party in Kreuzberg’s Willy-Brandt-Haus occurred when the prognosis came in that the FDP would not surpass the 5 percent threshold—Germans did coin the word *schadenfreude* after all. Of course, the party’s structural predicament with an exposed left flank from both the old-old leftist Linke and the new-left Greens has not improved. There is increased talk about the two epochal mistakes of the Social Democrats failing to integrate the Greens in the 1980s and the PDS/Left in the 1990s and 2000s. Even further, the discourse about whether the SPD can even (or should) still be considered a catch-all, people’s party (*Volkspartei*) with only about a quarter of the electorate and their old bastions, the unions, seemingly in terminal decline, will certainly continue.¹⁹

Indeed, the party leadership is in a bind—they have to move to the center to govern with Merkel, but cannot afford to alienate their ideological left, with other parties waiting to pounce on the disaffected. Gabriel even felt compelled to put the coalition agreement to a vote of the party’s membership and there was substantial worry that the laboriously negotiated document would not be endorsed. In the end, 75 percent did vote for the agreement and it should be noted that Gabriel was quite astute in using this tactic to his party’s benefit. He got much more from Merkel—control of six

out of sixteen ministries, including powerful portfolios such as foreign affairs, economics, and energy, justice, and social affairs, as well as policy concessions like a minimum wage and a lowering of the retirement age—than was expected, given that Merkel needed only five seats to gain a majority and that the SPD leadership at least was seemingly desperate to regain power. As former party heavyweight Franz Müntefering once memorably put the pragmatic case for governing: “Opposition ist Mist” (opposition is dung).²⁰ In any case, about 6 months after the election, the party had neither gained nor lost support, hovering between 25 and 26 percent according to surveys.²¹

The Greens lost 2.3 percent, winning 8.4 percent of the second votes. Although a decline of 2 percent of the national vote does not appear excessive, this represents a 21.5 percent decrease from their 2009 level of support. Moreover, the outcome seemed much worse because the Greens had been riding very high in the polls in the years before the election. In mid 2011, for example, they were polling over 20 percent, so that their actual 2013 result was 60 percent less than their peak. At one point, they were even more popular than the SPD, prompting much speculation that they were fast becoming the new center-left *Volkspartei* (people’s party). They also experienced a string of major victories at the state level—results often interpreted as harbingers of national trends. Most notably, in March 2011 they scored a plurality victory of 24 percent in Baden-Württemberg and now lead that government in conjunction with the SPD—the first time that the Greens have ever been the senior coalition partner at the Land level. Thus, the 2013 national outcome was perceived as an utter failure. There was a major leadership shake-up in the days following the election with the experienced Jürgen Trittin and Claudia Roth both stepping down, eventually replaced by Simone Peter and Cem Özdemir.

The Left lost 3.3 percent compared to the last election and came in at 8.6 percent, an almost 30 percent decline from their 2009 totals. Despite its losses and the almost constant prognostications of the party’s terminal decline with an aging eastern electorate and the retirement, death, or decline of charismatic founding leaders like Oskar Lafontaine, Lothar Bisky and even Gregor Gysi, the Left, always propagandizing, spun their result. They celebrated becoming the third largest fraction in the new parliament and the largest opposition party, as well as rather cockily expressing their desire for a red-red-green coalition, pointing out that the three leftist parties together had a majority. The Greens and Left are the only two opposition parties in the new Bundestag. The governing parties have rarely dominated to this degree with 80 percent of the seats, compared to 73 percent for the 2005-2009 electoral period and 90 percent from 1966-1969—conferring a visibility and

responsibility from which both leftist groupings potentially could benefit, especially if the Social Democrats take a hit due to the inevitable compromises involved with assuming a share of governing responsibility.

Finally, the AfD, which was formed only in February 2013 by disgruntled intellectuals, almost made it into the Bundestag with 4.7 percent of the vote. Although focused largely on the problems of the Euro and advocating for Germany's withdrawal (or at least reconfiguration of the currency restricted to a hard core of northern and central European countries), the nascent party has also embraced other right-populist themes such as greater restrictions on immigration and less generous welfare benefits. Despite this profile, pollsters noted that this is really a protest movement, gaining many votes from easterners who previously had voted for the Left Party, as well as from a more educated clientele of disgruntled western FDP and CDU/CSU supporters. The surge of this party shows that even Germany is not immune to some destabilization resulting from the festering Eurozone crisis. Surveys from early 2014 show that the party, polling stronger than the FDP, will probably make it into the European Parliament in May 2014, especially given that the 3 percent threshold for that election was recently eliminated.²² For the center-right, the rise of the AfD is structurally similar to the challenge that the Left Party presents to the SPD—creating a constraint that inhibits a policy move to the center. Merkel cannot risk more right-wing voters defecting to this alternative on her right flank, nor could the Union expect the same kind of electoral success that it has recently experienced, if this party were to institutionalize itself at the federal, state, or even European level.

Plus ça change?

The election results also raise several other issues. Polls consistently showed that voters appreciated Merkel and wanted her to continue. They likewise revealed disdain for the FDP and wanted it to be kicked out of government. This is exactly what happened in a rare enough example of the democratic process working out as it is supposed to, especially in a system like Germany's based on proportional representation in which voters often have little control over the eventual configuration of the government. Moreover, post-election polls show a sizeable majority supporting another grand coalition, again exactly what transpired. There is a deep penchant for Lijphartian consensus politics in Germany—once rightfully called “the grand coalition state.”²³

It was also rumored that Merkel prefers such a centrist or even center-left coalition—certainly there was much less drama between 2005-2009 than

2009-2013. (A bitter FDP functionary on election night reportedly kept calling Merkel FDJ—a reference to the former East German communist youth organization, presumably implying that she has more leftist policy preferences). Also, with an absolute majority, Merkel would have been unable to check and balance the more right-wing tendencies of the CDU and especially the Bavarian CSU. Indeed, during coalition negotiations and after the inauguration of the new government, the most tension seemed to result from within the Union parties and not with the Social Democrats. Thus, a grand coalition increased the likelihood of keeping the Bavarians in check.

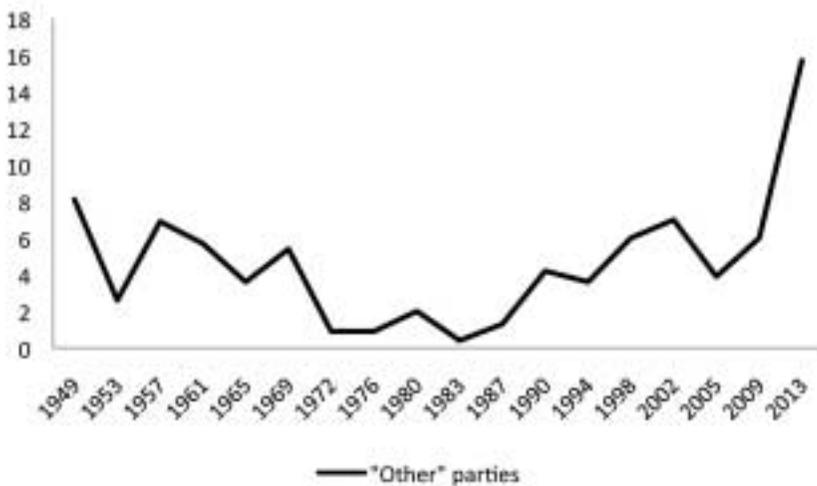
Moreover, the government must still garner a majority of the Bundesrat on about half of all legislation. In that territorially based upper chamber, the governing parties in the Bundestag have only twenty-seven out of sixty-nine votes as of January 2014. Although all other states have at least one of the two governing Bundestag parties in their governments, the vast majority of states will probably abstain from voting. Had the Black-Yellow coalition continued, it would have commanded only ten votes. Centrist, consensual governing is structurally preordained in the German system. This is not even to mention the many laws that are promulgated at the EU level and then rather automatically implemented domestically.

The election also shows that trends previously believed to be inexorable are not. The two “people’s parties” often called the “elephants” did not continue their long-term decline—in fact their combined share of the second vote went up from 56.8 to 67.2 percent between 2009 and 2013. Although this is still far away from the peak of the two-party share achieved in 1976 at 91.2 percent of second votes, obituaries for the *Volksparteien* are perhaps still premature.²⁴ Moreover, the participation rate rose from 70.8 to 71.5 percent of eligible voters, reversing another long-term trend and partially belying the allegation that Merkelism is based on demobilization. Even were one to accept that demobilization is Merkel’s tactic, it has proven counterproductive.

More troubling was the second vote share going to “other” parties, which more than doubled from 6 percent in 2009 to an all-time high of 15.7 percent or almost one in six votes. Even had the FDP made it into the Bundestag, over a tenth of the all-important second votes was still lost. There are several implications. First, these votes are essentially wasted on parties that did not gain seats and that will not have their perspectives aired in the corridors of power. Clearly, there are positions supported by numerous voters that are not represented by the conventional parties, pointing to a weakness or shortcoming of Germany’s representative democratic system. The rise of this “other” vote might be a kind of canary in the coalmine, indicat-

ing a degree of protest voting and dissatisfaction with the current policy course, party options, or even the system. Second, this high level of wasted votes has strengthened advocates for lowering or abolishing the 5 percent threshold, a position that the Constitutional Court may very well endorse (along the lines of its jurisprudence concerning the electoral law for European Parliament elections). Given the original justification behind the threshold, namely to inhibit small extremist parties from gaining legitimizing representation and public financing connected to this, this is potentially cause for concern. The threshold has hitherto successfully prevented right radical parties from making it into the Bundestag.

Figure 1: Share of Second Votes for Parties Below the Electoral Threshold



Source: Bundeswahlleiter; 2002 data includes 4.4 percent for the former communist PDS although they had two direct mandates.

Some have pointed out that leftist parties have a numerical majority of seats in the Bundestag, although a so-called red-red-green coalition had consistently been rebuffed by the SPD and Greens—at least for now. This does not mean that Germany is somehow a (majority) center-left nation. Recall that just under 10 percent of the wasted votes went to various (center)-right parties—the Liberals and AfD. The right-radical NPD got 1.3 percent. Even further, it is even unclear that the Greens should be considered a leftist party any longer with many considering them to have become “bourgeois” (*bürgerlich*).²⁵ There were fascinating analyses about how many former CDU supporters moved to the Greens before their landmark 2011 victory in Baden-Württemberg.²⁶ Once thinkable Black-Green coalitions

have already occurred in many large cities such as Cologne, Bonn, and Frankfurt, and at the Land level in Hamburg (2008-2010) and in Hesse (since January 2014). In a hugely significant gesture, Merkel even engaged in exploratory talks (*Sondierungsgespräche*) with the Greens in October 2013 before negotiating with the Social Democrats.²⁷ Although nothing came of these discussions this time around, it opens a tantalizing prospect for future governing options at the national level.

The Pirates, usually considered leftist, received only 2.2 percent—essentially their share in 2009. Many were surprised at the collapse of the new media’s darling after a string of overhyped regional victories in 2011 (8.9 percent in Berlin) and 2012, including 7.4 percent in Saarland, 8.2 percent in Schleswig-Holstein, and 7.8 percent in North Rhine-Westphalia. There is a lesson here on overinterpreting such protest, new-media parties. In the end, there is no substitute for classic organizational virtues—a clear party program beyond a single issue (here Internet freedom), the necessity of a vetting process for members, and stable leadership. Michel’s iron law of oligarchy has once again been substantiated. It is still too early to know if the Pirates will absorb this lesson as the Greens did (albeit only partially) in the 1980s and early 1990s. If they do not, they are very likely a spent force.

The new election law—an excessively complicated, verging on unintelligible, attempt to address potential problems of a “negative voting weight” and disproportions that could result from overhanging mandates—was not a factor despite predictions to the contrary. In the end, the new Bundestag will have 631 seats (thirty-three more than the legal minimum of 598)—just slightly more than the 622 after 2009. There were only five overhanging mandates (down from twenty-four in 2009), as well as twenty-eight compensatory seats. With its “compensatory mandates” (*Ausgleichmandate*) the law was supposed to achieve a better vote-seat correspondence, but with 15 percent of the vote wasted, this did not happen. Also, the law did not particularly aid smaller parties, as was also intended. It is important to note that the Union would not have had an absolute majority under the old electoral law either (although they would have been closer to the majority needing only three more seats). Besides, voting behavior and party campaign tactics have started to shift in response to the new incentive structure, making projections based on the old law highly speculative. With the advantage potentially gained from overhanging mandates now muted, there is now much more of a necessity to maximize second vote shares. Every effort will be expended to make sure that voters no longer split their first and second votes, as was increasingly common before the changes.²⁸ This will work to the detriment of the smaller parties, especially the FDP, which successfully used this tactic in 2009.

Finally, the large amount of media coverage that this election received in the international press was also noteworthy. In Europe, this is understandable given the widespread perception that Merkel essentially governs the Eurozone today. Certainly, German policy has a real and material impact in other countries, so it pays for them to care. One might even add that with the exception of Greece, such influence and power is well supported by many Europeans.²⁹ More surprising was that the American print media (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*) devoted numerous stories to the campaign and election results—although this trend of increased coverage of Germany goes back a couple of years and probably has much to do with a renewed commitment on the part of these news organizations to sponsor foreign bureaus in the country. This speaks to the widespread U.S. perception that Germany has become the most powerful, “indispensable” country in Europe today.

Interestingly, the American media seemed genuinely to think that the German elections were a charming, throw-back to simpler, better times—a six-week, relatively inexpensive campaign instead of two-year, bankruptcy-inducing trench warfare. Indeed, estimates are that the German parties spent \$93 million in 2013 compared to \$2.4 billion just for the 2012 U.S. presidential election cycle and as much as \$6 billion overall³⁰—that is approximately \$1.16 per capita in Germany versus \$7.64 or \$19.11 in the United States—but then few Germans appear to endorse the view that money equals free speech and, thus, should not be limited.

Looking Forward

Overall, the 2013 Bundestag election campaign took place during an exceptional period of relative prosperity, domestic tranquility, and the perception of success. This was truly Angela Merkel’s *Herbstmärchen* (autumn fairy tale), a counterpart and even continuation of the country’s *Sommermärchen* during the hosting of the World Cup of soccer in 2006.³¹ But then, autumn is not summer—or spring, for that matter. It connotes ending and completion and the expectation of a period of cold, rest, and death to follow. Is winter approaching for the Merkel Republic?

There is certainly a hefty backlog of issues that will need to be addressed sooner as opposed to later—the destabilizing export surplus, which has garnered criticism not just from European partners, but the European Commission and the U.S. government;³² the lack of infrastructural investment, especially in the west, the needs of which have been relatively neglected

since unification and the necessary rebuilding of eastern Germany;³³ stagnant domestic wages and demand; and the festering problems of the peripheral Eurozone economies. Apocalyptic scenarios could still transpire—if all of Germany’s financial promises to various bailout packages are actually called upon. Moreover, international crises—most recently concerning Ukraine and Russia in early 2014—can have a marked impact on an exposed trading state like Germany. Over 300,000 German jobs are said to be dependent on trade with Russia and over 35 percent of Germany’s natural gas and crude oil supplies come from Russia.³⁴ Thus, if the economic sanctions that the West imposed on Putin’s regime in March 2014 persist or intensify—or if the Russian president retaliates even more, for example, by restricting the westward flow of natural gas—the detrimental effects on the German economy could be pronounced.

More deeply, I cannot rid myself of the sneaking suspicion that perhaps Germany’s much vaunted economic strengths are actually in terminal decline. The current economic *Boomchen* (boomlet), with the attendant resurgence of respect for *Modell Deutschland* and its social market economy, so evident since Merkel came to power, may simply be masking temporarily the inevitable death of the German system: high-value added manufacturing, export dependence, the apprentice system, the vestiges of patient capital, and generous redistribution to keep the social peace—even consensus politics. Indeed, Germany as “sick man of Europe”—the narrative not that long ago—may be coming back even more strongly than ever. The markets to which Germany has exported its precision products are becoming saturated and are starting to manufacture these very products themselves. Services have never been a particular strength, but may be the only way forward. The looming aging and shrinking of the population has barely been addressed, and, although there have not recently been race riots and successful xenophobic parties as in many other European countries, Germany is hardly a paragon of multicultural functionality. Merkel’s policies of small steps or superficial measures have done very little to address many of these structural challenges. Thus, Merkel’s electoral triumph should actually be deemed not her *Herbstmärchen*, but her *Nachsommermärchen* (Indian Summer Fairytale)—temporary, illusory, and certainly not to be generalized.

More specific challenges also loom. Who comes after Merkel? She has intimated that this is her last term—that there will be a new chancellor in 2017. This has already conferred on her a quasi lame-duck status. But who will follow? Merkel’s center-right bench is seemingly shallow, especially after she so successfully eliminated so many (potential) rivals over the last fifteen years—Friedrich Merz, Edmund Stoiber, Roland Koch—to name just

a few. Others have fallen thanks to self-inflicted wounds—plagiarism or corruption scandals—Theodor zu Guttenberg, Christian Wulff, and Annette Schavan. Current or former minister-presidents are hard to discern— the once promising David McAllister lost a very close election in Lower Saxony in early 2013 and is currently doing time at the European Parliament. Horst Seehofer, despite a degree of rehabilitation in recent years, is himself flawed (the “second family” scandal)³⁵ and is probably too right wing or Bavarian for a national electorate. The heir apparent appears to be Ursula von der Leyen, who, in my opinion just does not seem to have that leadership “je ne sais quoi” necessary for success.³⁶ On the SPD side, besides the obvious federal ministers, my money is on the popular Hanelore Kraft, the current minister president of the largest Land, North Rhine Westphalia, although some buzz has surrounded Hamburg’s Olaf Scholz. My dream 2017 campaign would pit Merkel against Kraft.

In any case, from one perspective this was one of the most conservative election results in recent times. Not only did an austerity-preaching, conservative party get re-elected, but many of the old verities of the Federal Republic re-asserted themselves: the dominance of the two elephants, the fatuousness of a new media political universe, and the importance of classical campaign organization and tactics. The polls barely moved in the six months before and in the six months after the election. Thus, it seems fitting to end this introduction with an aphorism from Germany’s most special partner, the French: “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”—at least as long as Merkel can continue to ride the momentum from her magical *Herbstmärchen*. But then, winter always follows autumn.

Notes

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