

## German Lessons

*Should progressives frustrated with our democracy pine for a parliamentary system? In a word—nein.*

**G**ermany's national elections took place on Sunday, September 27, a warm, clear fall day that brought people out to Berlin's sidewalk promenades, trying to soak up one last day of good weather before the long winter. My wife, two friends, and I, all of us political junkies, had plans to hit a few parks and museums, then settle on a bar to watch the returns once the polls closed at six. Later that night we'd work our way to one of the campaign parties around town.

At 6:05, just done with a leisurely bite at a garden café in Charlottenburg, we rang up another American friend with our evening agenda. "Not sure the parties will be swinging much longer," he said. "The election's just been called." With stunning accuracy, exit polls were already showing a decisive win for the coalition of Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP). By 6:10, concession speeches were being prepared; within the hour, the election was over.

---

CLAY RISEN *is the managing editor of* Democracy: A Journal of Ideas.

We scrambled to find a bar with a TV. There were crowded pubs everywhere—but the patrons were all watching soccer. After half an hour we found a bar with an unused flat screen. “Can we watch the election returns?” we asked the server. Judging by the look on her face, we might as well have asked about competitive knitting. But hey, we were paying customers, so she said yes. We watched for an hour, and not a single person joined us.

What a contrast to last November in Washington, when my wife and I bounced from crowded bar to bar watching the U.S. presidential election returns. To be fair, we were on the verge of electing the nation’s first African-American president, while this year Germany was bringing to a merciful end what everyone, even some of the candidates, deemed the country’s most boring campaign ever.

Then again, whether one considered the election “boring” speaks volumes about the difference between German and American political cultures. True, Merkel and her Social Democratic (SPD) opponent, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, made for excellent insomnia cures (a last-minute music video by the sexed-up “Steinmeier Girl” notwithstanding). This year, barely 70 percent of Germans voted, the lowest number

**Despite all the complaints, the Democrats and Republicans do a relatively good job of adapting and responding to voters’ needs.**

in postwar history. But to an American observer, the election had all the elements of high political drama: The sudden, double-digit power of the far-left Linke party, the once-dominant center-left SPD fighting for relevance amid tanking poll numbers, the popularity of the pro-market center-right during a deep recession.

Germany is a vibrant parliamentary democracy, yet its body politic is asleep. Germans either trust their elected officials to take care of things, or they sink into a deep political apathy. The latter camp is growing: A recent poll showed only 49 percent of Germans had faith in their democratic institutions, dropping to 29 percent in the former East Germany. Yet aside from a small activist current, they rarely try to change things.

Next to European health care and European urban planning, the aspect of European life for which liberal Americans pine most often is the continent’s parliamentary politics. Whenever I run down the litany of niche German political parties—alongside the Greens, the FDP, and the Linke, there’s the Animal Protection Party, the new-age Violet Party, and the Retired People’s Party, among others—for left-leaning American friends, they sigh and say, “I wish.” Parties that actually represent people’s interests? Coalitions built on cross-party compromise, rather than ideological stone walls? Wouldn’t that be great, they say.

A progressive's dream. I agree. Or rather, I did, before I spent this previous August and September in Germany. After seeing German politics up close, I'll take my two-party system, thank you very much.

**T**here is a lot to recommend the political structure in Germany. Just look at the results: Since the founding of the federal republic in 1949, it has held the country together through the era postwar rebuilding, the Cold War, the left-wing violence of the 1970s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and reunification.

In the early postwar years, Germany, like the United States, had two massive "people's" parties, the center-right CDU and the center-left SPD, along with the much smaller, eccentric FDP, which over the last 60 years has aligned with both sides of the spectrum. For nearly 40 years, the SPD and CDU accounted for about 90 percent of the vote.

This worked, for a while. But already by the late 1960s, frustrations were growing. Because the parties are structured as membership organizations, with lifelong career ladders, it is almost impossible for grassroots movements, even inside the membership, to influence a party's course. The parties may represent "the people," but they are led by oligarchic central committees, which have little incentive to adapt in response to changes in voting patterns.

Little incentive—until it's too late. As in the United States, the left-wing radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s drew on deep generational and political contradictions in German society. But it lasted longer, and expressed itself much more violently, than in America because there was no party system to absorb it. By 1972, former radicals in the United States were campaigning for McGovern; in Germany, they were bombing U.S. Army bases.

Eventually, some of those radicals entered politics as the Green party; others shaved, put on suits, and joined the SPD. But the SPD bigwigs were unwilling to make room for them. Many of them were never entirely comfortable there, and out of frustration with SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's welfare-law reforms of the early 2000s they left to form the Linke.

Clinton's welfare reforms of the 1990s also produced enormous disagreement on the left. But because there was nowhere for dissenting factions to go, they had to fight it out internally—and, over time, these centripetal forces created a new consensus, which formed the basis for Barack Obama's ride into the White House and the backbone of support for his progressive agenda. The German left, on the other hand, simply picked up its toys and went to play elsewhere, thanks to the centrifugal forces of the parliamentary system. The result is a rump center-left, an eco-centric postmaterialist left, and a self-righteous neo-Marxist far-left, none of which had anything constructive to say during

the recent economic crisis, a time when, typically, left-wing, pro-government parties are needed most.

The constant proliferation of parties is an expression of the system's shortcomings, not its strengths; rather than adapt to sociopolitical changes, as America's does, it fragments. Having three left parties, each with its own agenda and suspicions, is no way to get progressive legislation through the Bundestag. The Democrats may not be perfect, but at least they stick together behind a set of principles about how the country should be run.

**A**nd just as the Linke is establishing its bona fides—it won an astounding 12 percent of the vote in September's election—along comes yet another fissure in German politics: the Pirate party, which won 2 percent of the vote in its first national campaign (and over 13 percent among first-time male voters). Here the split is generational; the Pirates, only semi-ironically named after Internet piracy, represent the young and online in German society, a class of voters who see the liberating potential of Internet politics but see absolutely no interest from the leading parties in exploiting it. As with the 1970s radicals, it's because the establishment doesn't think change is necessary—"the parties love control, and Internet politics means giving up some of that control," one web consultant to the Green party told me.

Of course, the Pirates aren't about to break the mold of German political parties. Like their elders, they represent a client base, not a universal vision. The notion of the "people's party" was always a sham built on an anachronistic, industrial-age politics that valued conformity over individuality. In the post-industrial era, those values are reversed, and as society fragments into "taste cultures" and sub-tribes, so too does European parliamentary politics. If you can't find a party that speaks for you, start your own.

Obviously, new, sustainable parties don't emerge every day. But Germany now has six factions (including the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Socialists) in the Bundestag, and each government is a cobbling together of divergent political interests, achieved only after lengthy negotiations—even the current, ideologically consistent CDU/FDP coalition took over a month to solidify. Such coalitions may have theoretical advantages, but in practice they encourage caution and incremental policymaking, lest one party should quit the team.

The problem is that the big decisions in contemporary politics—climate change, global terrorism, international financial reform—demand a policymaking coherence and stability that only broad-based, pragmatic parties like America's can provide. Not surprisingly, big changes, particularly on climate, are increasingly

passed up the ladder to the EU, where less transparent, less democratic bodies can make the tough decisions that national parliaments can't.

Complaining about Washington infighting is practically a national pastime in the United States, but we'd do well to consider how much our two parties have achieved relative to Europe. Most of the things progressives like about Germany were established in the early postwar days or the unique moment of post-communist unification. Consider everything that, for better or worse, America's two parties have achieved over the last decade: The creation of a massive domestic security apparatus after 9/11, the invasion and occupation of two distant countries, a series of deep tax cuts, a Medicare drug benefit, an economic bailout, and the temporary takeover of large swaths of the banking and automotive sectors. At the time of this writing, the United States is on the verge of passing sweeping reforms of its health-insurance system, a mid-stream step that few countries could dream of achieving.

And while the two parties don't guarantee complete coherence, they play a vital role in corraling various levels of opinion and forcing Congress toward consensus. Just imagine if the United States had a parliamentary system like Germany's. We'd probably have a center-left and center-right party, greens, libertarians, and progressives, too; but we'd also have a Texas party, a farm-labor party, a right-wing-fundamentalist party, an America First party—in a large heterogeneous society, the possibilities are endless. We'd be Italy, or India. There's no end to the shortcoming of the Republican-Democrat duopoly, but it's more effective than the alternative.

**W**hile televised soccer and the weather probably accounted for some of the diverted attention in Berlin on election day, everyday Germany has more or less given up on achieving substantial change through its party system. Well over half the respondents in pre-election polls said they didn't think it mattered who won; they felt secure in, or at least resigned to, the fact that the country would go along about the same as before, no matter who won.

Is this a function of German society, or its political structure? Both. But the clientelist, multi-party system has a lot to do with such apathy. Membership organizations have difficulty representing the views of non-members, even if they stand to win more votes; after all, those voters don't pay dues or elect the party leadership. At the same time, there aren't nearly enough parties to represent the wide spectrum of political stances present in even German society. The result is usually apathy, though at times—like the 1970s—it is apathy's opposite: rage.

And again, for all the complaining that Americans direct toward their parties, the Democrats and the GOP do a relatively good job of adapting and

responding to voters' needs. Lacking a membership roster, but with a mandate to represent at least half the voting public, the two parties have to cast wide nets, and they have to recast them each election. Each time they do, they have to calibrate their message and adapt to voters' needs, hopes, and fears. Like a bickering couple celebrating their golden anniversary, Americans might not always like the parties we have, but we're committed to them. And when we want them to change, we grow active, not apathetic, because we know that it's relatively easy to do.

I take second place to no one in admiring the achievements of modern Germany: A social market, a sturdy welfare net, a robust educational system, a high savings rate, a thick pacifist streak, and an aggressive environmental consciousness. But after my time in Berlin, I'm convinced that these achievements have come despite its parliamentary structure, not because of it. **D**