Globalization and the Transformation of the German Model

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1. Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s West Germany was widely seen as an attractive national model for other advanced capitalist economies for responding to problems in the global economy, including slower growth, greater financial instability, and increasing competition from developing countries. In contrast with other countries which relied mainly on either markets or state-directed industrial policy to deal with these challenges, the 'German Model' was based on a cooperative (or "corporatist") approach to industrial modernization. This corporatist approach involved a partnership between the state, business, and trade unions in developing and implementing new policies. This model performed impressively on a number of indicators including a high export surplus, low unemployment and high income equality.

In the mid-1990s, however, a marked increase in unemployment and a setback in company profitability and export performance initiated a debate on whether these corporatist institutions were flexible enough to deal with the growing challenges of the future. This chapter reviews the major features of the German model and the new challenges it is facing: German unification, the continued transformation of global product and capital markets, European integration, and a crisis in the welfare state stemming from demographic shifts and low labour market participation. One of the responses to these problems was increasing criticism of German institutions and the call for a more deregulated system along Anglo-Saxon lines. This criticism could be heard mainly from the business community and the conservative-liberal government in power through most of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the continued strong position of labour in the industrial relations system and the victory of a social democratic-green party coalition in national elections in 1998 and 2002 have sustained the corporatist approach to problem-solving at the company and national level. However, the modest success of this approach (in comparison with the 1970s) has cost the social democratic party much popular support and strained its relationship with the trade unions. These difficulties have raised the prospects for a victory of the conservative-liberal party coalition in the next federal election and a more market-based approach to policy making and implementation.

2. Characteristics of the German Model

The deep oil crisis recession of 1973/4 ushered in the end of the post-war 'golden age' of high-growth, low unemployment capitalism. While all economies were affected by this recession, the policy response and subsequent economic performance differed greatly between the advanced industrialized countries. West Germany in particular received widespread attention as an attractive alternative to the market-oriented (neo-liberal) and state-directed (*dirigiste*) models of adjustment to slower worldwide growth, greater competition from developing countries, and financial instability. The term *Modell Deutschland*, which was originally coined by the German Social Democratic Party in their re-election campaign in 1976, came to symbolize adaptation to these new conditions through a strategy of export-oriented industrial modernization.[1] The success of this strategy can be seen most clearly in Germany's export performance; between 1970 and 1990, exports as a percentage of GDP increased from 21 to 32 percent, the balance of trade was negative in only one year (1980) and the trade surplus increased from an annual average of 2.4% in the 1970s to 3.2% in the 1980s. In addition, Germany enjoyed good labour market performance; when using the standardized OECD figures, unemployment was lower than in western Europe and the US and the sharp trend toward wage and income inequality in most other industrialized countries was largely avoided (OECD 1993; 1994).[2]

Table 1: Comparative Economic Performance, 1980-1990
Germany, US, UK, France and OECD Average

	Germany	US	UK	France	OECD
Unemployment Rate	5.8	7.0	9.7	9.0	7.2
Trade surplus/GDP	1.7	-1.6	-0.1	-1.1	-0.7
GDP growth per capita	1.8	1.9	2.4	2.0	2.2

Source: OECD, Historical Statistics and National Accounts, various years.

At the heart of this ‘German model’ of adjustment was the upgrading of a broad spectrum of industrial sectors to concentrate production on higher-quality, specialized goods targeted toward premium domestic and world markets. This strategy, which has been variously named diversified quality production (Sorge and Streeck 1988), new production concepts (Kern and Schumann 1986) and flexible specialization (Piore 1984), is based on a combination of building on traditional strengths -- such as the technical ability and flexibility of skilled manual workers -- and the rapid incorporation of new machinery and production methods. This capacity, which was visible as early as the end of the last century when Germany became an industrial leader in, was strengthened after the first oil shock of 1973/4 through a mass upgrading of the skill base and the rapid diffusion of a number of innovations, most notably the microchip.[3]

In his landmark study of the industrial profiles of ten countries, Porter notes the exceptional broadness of the competitive advantage of Germany across a wide range of industrial sectors.[4] The most visible sector among these success stories is the automobile industry, which for millions of consumers worldwide has come to symbolize the craftsmanship and performance embodied in goods "made in Germany." The great expansion of production of traditionally low-volume luxury producers Mercedes-Benz and BMW to increase sales at the high end of the market is a significant story in and of itself. However, Germany's capacity to change has been most clearly demonstrated in the dramatic transformation of Volkswagen, which had been established expressly to mass-produce a low-cost car accessible to every household ("the Beetle"). After the first oil shock, Volkswagen radically changed its product market strategy by terminating production of the Beetle in Germany, introducing a range of new models aimed at significantly higher market segments and purchasing the niche producer Audi. This example was repeated again and again, not only in sectors familiar in the literature in English such as industrial machinery and chemicals but also in sectors such as steel, food processing, textiles and wooden furniture.[5]

The joint contributions of business, labour, and the state were crucial for the success of the German model. At the danger of some oversimplification, these contributions occurred within an institutional framework which can be characterized as “corporatist”. Unlike the neo-liberal market-based approach seen in countries like the US and UK, the state has supported a coordinated and pro-active response to market forces. However, unlike the dirigiste state in countries such as France and Japan, the level of targeting of resources to specific sectors and companies (“national champions”) in Germany has been low and initiatives have come mainly from the private sector.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the corporatist state is to support the collective organization of interest groups such as business and labour. The state provides associations with special privileges such as access to policy-making and representation vis-à-vis other associations. Furthermore, the state provides these associations with resources either directly through state funding or through the levying of membership fees. The strength of corporatism in Germany can be attributed both to cultural traditions and strong federalist institutions, which contribute to a tradition of constructive compromise within the political system.

As a result of this support, business has a high capacity to coordinate and cooperate through a dense network of industry associations and local chambers of commerce and industry. Furthermore, since industrialization in the late 19th century, the state has encouraged the banks and insurance companies to acquire large shareholdings in industrial companies. These shareholdings as well as interlocking board directorates result in a dense network linking the largest companies, sometimes called "Deutschland AG" (Germany, Inc.).[6] This coordination capacity through associations and through cross-shareholdings has helped business pursue its collective interests in the political arena, to participate in the provision of collective goods important for restructuring such as skill formation, and to help avoid the kind of destructive price competition that has plagued adjustment in other countries. This capacity has been key for allowing the build-up of an institutional infrastructure for competitiveness such as research institutes and day-release schools for the dual training system.

The corporatist approach extends into the industrial relations system. More than 80 percent of employees are covered by collective bargaining between unions and employers' associations at the sectoral level. Most workers in larger companies are also represented at the plant level by works councils and at the firm level by employee representation on company boards. Perhaps best captured in the phrase "conflictual partnership", labour has cooperated in the often drastic measures involved in adjustment without loosing their capacity to pressure employers to take the "high road" and to mobilize the rank-and-file when the integrity of the industrial relations system is threatened. The state has also reduced conflict by providing extensive early retirement subsidies to support restructuring in declining industries.

Although each of these three actors is potentially powerful enough to disrupt the system, they were rewarded for their cooperation throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Business enjoyed export success and reasonable profits, labour received high wages and a low level of income inequality, and the state experienced a strong balance of payments, moderate expenditures for labour market programmes, and relatively low debt levels.

3. The German Model: Overwhelmed by New Challenges?

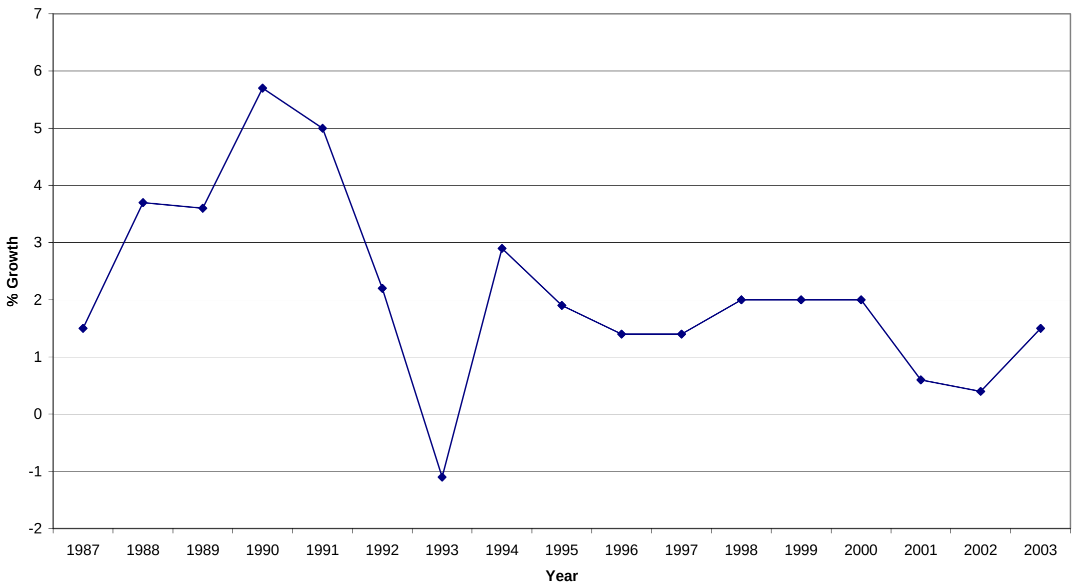
In the 1990s, however, a sense of crisis emerged in Germany and an extended debate on whether the German corporatist system is capable of handling the new challenges started. These challenges include (1) the “post-communist” political order, particularly German unification, (2) continuing shifts in the global production and financial systems, (3) European integration, and (4) a crisis in the welfare state.

While all of these factors play a role in the current sense of crisis, the initial trigger was undoubtedly German unification in October 1990. At the time of unification productivity in East Germany was only one third of the West German level, and its markets were concentrated in the Soviet bloc countries. Although there were great hopes in the early 1990s that eastern Germany could be built up as a commercial gateway between west and east Europe, the collapse of the Soviet economy led to the disappearance of these traditional markets. At the same time, the replacement of the East German currency with the Deutsche Mark – and thus the imposition of a single currency on all of Germany – removed the possibility of compensating for productivity differences through adjustments in the exchange rate. The corporatist wage-bargaining system in western Germany, which was transferred to the east, is based on a low level of wage inequality. Wage levels in eastern Germany rose rapidly as a result of this transfer, and the less productive east German companies were therefore priced out of western markets.

Adding to the adjustment problems was the fact that unification was mainly financed through fiscal transfers from western Germany, which resulted in a massive increase in federal debt. East Germans were allowed to exchange their money at parity (i.e. one east Mark for one Deutsche Mark), which provided them with a large amount of cash to satisfy their pent-up demand for western consumer goods. Although this initially created an economic boom, with GDP growth exceeding 5 percent in 1990 and 1991, the German central bank (the

Bundesbank) was unhappy with this debt-financed boom and increased interest rates. As a result of these high interest rates and a worldwide slowdown in demand, Germany experienced a sharp recession in 1992/93. GDP decreasing by more than one percent in 1993, which was a particularly rapid deceleration considering that GDP growth was above five percent in 1990 and 1991. Economic growth since then has been sluggish, averaging somewhat below 2 percent per year (see graph 1).

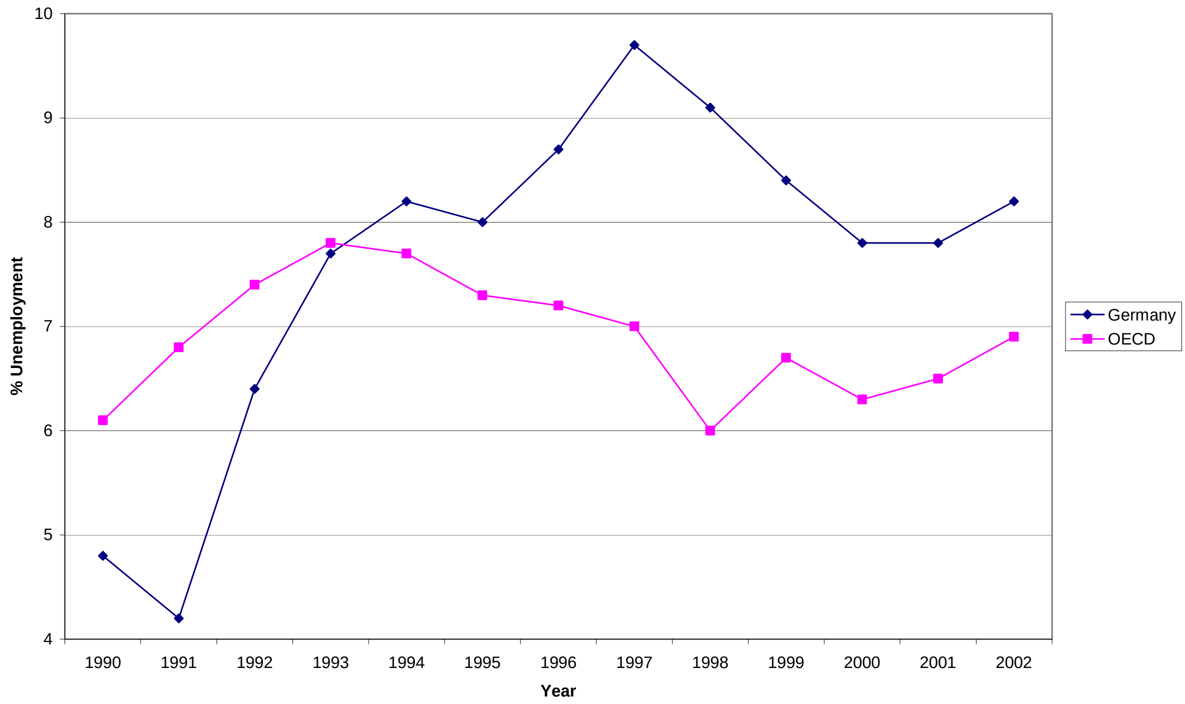
Graph 1: GDP Annual Growth in Germany, 1987-2003



Source: OECD.

This unfavourable development in economic growth has been accompanied by a dramatic deterioration in the employment situation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s western Germany had an unemployment rate significantly below the OECD average. However, in 1994 the unified German rate surpassed the OECD and has remained stubbornly high since then. The OECD rate in contrast has trended downwards. Although some of the increase in Germany is attributable to the collapse in employment in eastern Germany, there also has been a significant deterioration in western Germany.

Graph 2: Unemployment Rate in Germany and OECD, 1990-2002



Source: OECD.
Note: Note: up until and including 1992 western Germany; 1993 and after unified Germany

The sense of economic crisis was not isolated to eastern Germany, however. World market shares of Germany's core "medium-tech" industries -- autos, chemicals, industrial machinery and electronics – were slipping throughout the first half of the 1990s, particularly relative to Japanese competition. Production and employment in high-tech areas such as information technology and biotechnology also remained underdeveloped relative to the US and England.[7]

Although the profitability and competitiveness of large German companies has improved since the mid-1990s crisis, this has not led to significant job creation in Germany. One reason is that major improvements in productivity have led to less demand for labour. A second reason is that many of these companies have accelerated their attempts to internationalize. On the one hand company internationalization involves moving production closer to consumers in more dynamic markets, such as North America and Asia, rather than exporting goods produced in Germany. This reduces exchange rate risk and also makes it easier to incorporate customer demands into production. Another aspect of internationalization is to transfer production to eastern Europe, where labour is significantly cheaper. A final reason is that increasing demands of financial investors – particularly foreign pension and mutual funds – for "shareholder value," have led to a reallocation of funds within the firm away from labour in favour of profits and dividends. The exposure of German companies to pressure from foreign investors has been increased by the fact that, since the mid 1990s, the large banks have been reducing their shareholdings in industrial companies. As a result companies in the network "Germany, Inc." are exposed to the threat of hostile takeovers and have to adopt shareholder value to increase their share prices in order to decrease their attractiveness as a takeover target. Motives for the banks' sale of shares include pressure to raise funds and also to avoid conflicts of interest in investment banking activities, such as mergers and acquisitions.[8]

The third major challenge for the German model is European integration. The European Single Market initiative and European Monetary Union (EMU) are European responses to the globalizing economy. However, both of these at the same time constrain Germany's ability to respond to its domestic economic problems, particularly unemployment. One constraint is pressure for deregulation in telecommunications and transportation, both of which are areas where the public sector provided large amounts of employment. A second constraint is the increasing fiscal burden for Germany, the "paymaster" or largest net contributor to the European Union. The EU budget has increased dramatically due to the establishment of structural and regional funds to help the newer, less-wealthy "peripheral" countries in the EU such as Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Greece deal with change caused by the internal market.

However, the greatest EU constraint on national economic policy-making is undoubtedly the Maastricht Treaty, which lays the groundwork for the EMU and the single

European currency, or Euro. This treaty imposes strict criteria for fiscal and monetary discipline as prerequisites for countries participating in the EMU. Most significant among these is the requirement that government deficits not exceed three percent of GDP. While intended to encourage convergence among member countries and confidence in the stability of the new currency, at the same time these criteria have restricted Germany's ability to use deficit spending and loose monetary policy to encourage economic growth and employment creation. Although Germany and a handful of other European countries are currently exceeding the three percent limit, deficit spending (and thus government stimulus of the economy) would undoubtedly be much higher in the absence of this limit. Ironically, these measures were insisted upon by the German government (at the behest of the *Bundesbank*) during the Maastricht single currency negotiation process in order to keep *other* countries fiscally sober.

A final challenge for the German corporatist model is a crisis in the social security system and the welfare state. Germany has had relatively generous programmes for unemployment insurance, retirement and disability pensions, and health care. Industrial conflict in the 1980s and early 1990s was reduced in part by early retirement programmes, which allowed redundant workers in their late 50s and early 60s to go directly into retirement rather than unemployment. The unemployment rate was also kept down by one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the OECD and the exceptionally long period of time involved in getting a degree in higher education. Finally, the birth rate has plummeted at the same time that the average life expectancy has increased, leading to a demographic crisis for the pay-as-you-go public pension system.

Since most of these programmes are financed through employer and employee contributions, indirect labour costs (i.e. costs of labour other than direct wages) rapidly increased during the 1980s and 1990s to over 40% of wage costs. Employers have argued that, although direct wage increases in the last decade have been moderate, the increase in indirect labour costs have made it increasingly uneconomical to locate production in Germany. This has increased pressure to reform core principles of Germany's social security system, including solidarity between the generations, low levels of inequality, and reduction of vulnerability to market forces and structural change.

4. The Response to New Challenges

One response within Germany to these challenges, which has been strongest among the business community and the liberal party (FDP), is to demand the reform of German institutions more along the lines of the Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal or market model. These critics blame strong unions, high labour costs, extensive regulations, and the government bureaucracy for the increasing unattractiveness of "*Standort Deutschland*" (the German production location). Businesses claim that they face a major cost disadvantage relative to other countries due to high wages, social security contributions and taxes on business. Strong unions, works councils and dismissal protection legislation have constrained flexibility in the use of labour. Because wage levels are set through industry level bargaining, employers complain that they cannot design incentive systems within the firm needed to motivate employees. Finally, the business community has argued that the state bureaucracy has imposed unnecessary barriers on innovation, most notoriously in strict regulations on genetic research.

These critics eye the "American model" with envy. However, implementing reforms is easier said than done in a corporatist system, where many interests have the power to veto proposals, or at least to water them down substantially. In 1996, the then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced an initiative to cut unemployment in half by the year 2000. To achieve this goal he pushed through legislation to weaken dismissal protection, to lower the statutory minimum requirement on employers for sick pay from 100% to 80% of normal pay, to reduce unemployment and income assistance benefit rates and eligibility for early retirement pensions, and to deregulate financial markets and increase the supply of venture capital. In addition, commissions were established in order to develop proposals to reduce the cost burden on employers through the fundamental reform of the tax and social security systems. However, there was remarkably little progress on implementing these measures, in part because of opposition groups within the governing coalition. For example, more radical labour market reform was blocked by the Christian Democratic trade unionists' group CDA.

In the collective bargaining arena, the increasing desire of large companies to offer customized incentives to highly skilled workers and lower the wages of the unskilled led to proposals to significantly weaken the cornerstone of the German system of coordinated bargaining, the sectoral-level collective agreement (*Flächentarifvertrag*) (Carlin and Soskice 1997). Impatient with the pace of reform, record numbers of companies left or threatened to leave employers' associations in order to negotiate company-level agreements. This phenomenon of *Verbandsflucht*, which has been particularly strong in eastern Germany and during the 1992/3 recession, raised the spectre of the loss of the coordinating capacity of capital, one of the cornerstones of the German model.

As previously discussed, German businesses have made remarkable progress in restructuring. More efficient “lean production” methods of manufacturing developed by the Japanese have been adopted on a widespread basis in sectors such as automobiles and electronics. In order to deal with exchange rate fluctuations and to be nearer to customers, many larger companies have expanded their production facilities in the US, Latin America and Asia. Finally, a number of larger companies have adopted new organizational and strategic concepts such as “shareholder value” in order to boost profitability and improve their market position.

Criticism of German institutions from the government coalition also became more muted as the 1998 national elections approached. The governing centre-right parties had an interest in claiming that economic conditions were improving as a result of their policies.

Furthermore, these parties ran into a credibility problem with the electorate when making the case for another term in office after relatively little progress in reform during their sixteen years at the head of the coalition.

A final rejection of the neo-liberal model was provided by the resounding rejection by the electorate of the neo-liberal response in the October 1998 elections. Instead, majority support was given to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the green party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). These parties support a more activist and less anti-trade union approach to economic modernization than their centre-right predecessors. However, the need to reduce the budget deficit to below the 3% of GDP level set in the Maastrict treaty as well as the increasing financial burden of the welfare state forced the coalition to implement a number of unpopular measures to cut costs. The unpopularity of these measures may very well lead to defeat of the coalition the next federal election.

One of the major initiatives of the red-green coalition was a strengthening of works councils through a reform of the Works Constitution Act (Betriebsverfassungsgesetz) in 2001. This new law strengthened the rights of existing works councils and also made it significantly easier to organize works councils in sectors dominated by small firms or branches, such as retail, hotels and restaurants. A second initiative was a reform of the pension system (the so-called Riester reforms, named after the Minister of Labour at the time) which reduced the level of public pension provision and encouraged private savings. Unlike "defined contribution" private pension systems in countries like the US and UK, which shift many financial market risks to the employee, the Riester reforms required that at least the paid-in capital be guaranteed by the plan providers. Furthermore, unions are required to be involved in the negotiation of industry-wide pension plans, such as the *Metall Rente* plan established in the metalworking sector.

The most sustained efforts of the red-green coalition have undoubtedly been in the area of labour market policy. In his election campaign in 1998, the social democratic candidate for chancellor Gerhardt Schröder promised to make job creation his main priority. Shortly after his election Schröder established the Alliance for Jobs (Bündnis für Arbeit), a tripartite institution based on a cooperative approach of business, labour and the state to discuss, develop and implement solutions to economic and employment problems. The Alliance was based on the hope that Germany can repeat the positive experiences with a corporatist solution developed in the Netherlands. Within a tripartite context, the unions agreed to wage moderation by the unions, the state agreed to flexibilize labour market institutions by the state, and employers agreed to increase employment, particularly part-time employment in the service sector. The result had been a significantly lower unemployment rate and higher level of employment generation in the service sector in the Netherlands than in Germany.

Although the Alliance for Jobs was hindered by disagreements within both the trade union and the employers' camps and its achievements quite modest, a number of proposals discussed within the context of the Alliance have subsequently been incorporated into legislation. The most significant of these measures has been a restructuring of labour market policy, including a reduction in active labour market measures, a liberalising of the use of temporary agency workers, and a reduction in the generosity of unemployment insurance and welfare payments. The measures have been named the Hartz Laws, after the name of the chairman of the commission set up to reform labour market policy. Interestingly enough, the liberalisation of temporary agency work was accompanied by the requirement that trade unions conclude collective bargaining agreements for workers in that sector. The reduction of unemployment and welfare benefits has been particularly controversial, accompanied by a series of "Monday demonstrations" in major cities reminiscent of 1989 and the fall of the wall in east Germany.

Although the social democratic-green coalition has been arguably more successful in labour market and social policy reforms than the previous right-liberal coalition, it appears that these measures have cost the social democrats considerable electoral support. In 2004, a particularly heavy year in terms of regional and local elections, the social democrats lost majority control in some of their key strongholds and set records in a number of jurisdictions for the worst post-war electoral performance.

5. Conclusion

The German national model of adjustment to new global challenges came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. This corporatist model – based on cooperation between the state and highly organized business and labour interests – was able to successfully contribute to the modernization of a wide variety of manufacturing industries. In the 1990s, however, the ability of this model to deal with four challenges – German unification, continued shifts in global production and consumption systems, European integration, and the crisis of the welfare state – was increasingly questioned. Segments of the business community and the liberal party suggest that Germany should reject its corporatist institutions in favour of a more market-oriented Anglo-Saxon approach to problem-solving.

Since the peak of economic problems was reached in the mid-1990s, however, support for such a neo-liberal model has decreased. Businesses, particularly large multinationals, have managed to regain profitability by implementing more efficient means of production and by increasing their presence in the Americas and Asia. The liberal-conservative coalition, which was able to only partially implement a deregulatory approach, was resoundingly defeated in national elections in October 1998. The red-green coalition has taken a much more activist and less anti-trade union approach to combating the problem of mass unemployment, as symbolized by the establishment of the tripartite Alliance for Jobs (Bündnis für Arbeit). This reaffirmation of the corporatist tradition in Germany has also received strong support from the European level.

Although the corporatist model of industrial relations and policymaking has enjoyed only limited success in dealing with the significant challenges that Germany currently faces, at the same time the public is sceptical that alternatives such as deregulation based on the neo-liberal model would perform significantly better. The party which has most strongly supported this alternative, the liberal party (FDP), has rarely gained much more than the five percent of the votes it needs in the federal elections to get into the German parliament. Instead, the Christian Democratic Party, which emphasizes a more paternalistic and less pro-market approach to social and economic policy, has been the main alternative to the social democrats. The corporatist model of industrial relations and policymaking will therefore probably continue to exist until the unlikely event that the liberal party becomes the strongest party in Germany.

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