

Extreme Right Parties in Germany

An overview

Although outbreaks of violence against foreigners, refugees and asylum-seekers worry the public and immigration is still a major issue, compared to the early and mid '90s the importance of right-wing parties in Germany has somewhat declined. Nevertheless, the three relevant right-wing parties of the '90s still exist and regularly manage to attract significant shares of the vote in *Land* elections.

Founded in 1964, the *National Democratic Party* (NPD) is the oldest amongst these parties. In many ways the party could be seen as a successor of Hitler's Nazi party (NSDAP). During the '60s, some 20 percent of the membership had also been members of the NSDAP. Amongst the party's leadership, this rate was much higher. The party's original platform was an idiosyncratic blend of anti-Bolshevism, Nazism, conservatism and even Catholic elements. Its main goals were German unification and a revision of the border with Poland. As for German right-wing parties in general, neo-liberal ideas or taxation issues never played a role for the NPD. In Kitschelt's terminology all relevant right-wing parties are welfare state chauvinists.

In a string of *Land* elections during the late '60s the NPD attracted up to 10 percent of the vote. However, in the General Election of 1969 the party was not able to overcome the five-percent hurdle and failed to gain parliamentary representation at the national level. This defeat almost proved fatal to the NPD and marked the beginning of a steep electoral decline and a massive internal struggle between competing party leaders.

In the '70s, the NPD adopted a marked anti-foreigner stance (labour immigration to Germany had only been started a few years before) and took an even more radical position on Nazism. The NPD continued to field candidates at the national, *Land* and municipal level but typically received less than one percent of the vote. Ever since, the NPD has been insignificant in electoral politics. The '90s brought a strange kind of revival for the party: The NPD tried quite effectively to attract skinheads and other violent right-wingers, especially in the eastern *Länder*. While the NPD has transformed itself from a (somewhat disreputable) party into a sort of backbone organisation for neo-Nazi street-fighters, it still receives all the privileges and benefits a party is entitled to. Therefore the federal government, the federal parliament and the assembly of the *Land* governments applied to the federal constitutional court to declare the NPD unconstitutional (which means that the party would be dissolved and subsequently banned) in November/December 2000. It seems highly likely that the court will indeed declare the NPD unconstitutional, but since this has not happened for more than 40 years and is considered an ultimate measure, it may very well take years until the court reaches a decision.

Compared to the NPD, the *Republican Party* (REP) is much younger and also more moderate. It was founded in 1983 by two former Christian Democratic MPs who disagreed with the CDU/CSU's soft line on the German Democratic Republic. In 1986, Franz Schönhuber, a TV presenter and journalist who had lost his job after writing a book praising the SS, became chairman of the REP. A charismatic populist, he was able to shape the party's image and program for almost 10 years. At least in public speeches Schönhuber soon started to avoid any references to the Nazi past and tried to establish the REP as a far-right alternative to the Christian Democrats. The REP defends the welfare state but wants to limit its benefits to native Germans. This political concept was symbolised by the almost iconic image of a crowded lifeboat representing Germany that has played a prominent role in their propaganda for years. The party strictly opposes any form of legal or illegal immigration to Germany and sees itself as a protector of German culture and lifestyle. It also stands for law and order policies whilst they hint that most foreigners are crooks and vice versa. Usually the REP avoids openly hostile statements on foreigners (which could result in a lawsuit or even raise the question of whether the party is constitutional), but one finds a lot more subtle cues to racist and anti-Semitic ideas in their propaganda.

In the early and mid-'90s, the REP gained up to 10 percent of the vote in a couple of European and *Land* elections but failed in others and – more importantly – never overcame the five-percent hurdle at the national level. The late '90s witnessed a decline in the party. From 1996 onwards they failed to pass the threshold of parliamentary representation in all elections, although they often obtained between three and four percent of the vote. As a consequence, they lost their last seats in a *Land* parliament in 2001. The main reason for this decline was probably a change in the external political opportunity structure, especially the drop in the number of asylum seekers coming to Germany after the major parties had changed the relevant sections of the Federal constitution, but certainly conflict within the party also contributed to the party's problems. Personality clashes aside, this conflict revolved around the question whether the REP should form an (informal) cartel with the DVU, the third relevant right-wing extremist party in Germany. From the parties' point of view, such a cartel would make sense: In several instances both parties had failed because their respective candidates had run on separate tickets. In 1995 Schönhuber (who favoured co-operation with the DVU) left the party. Since then, his successor, Rolf Schlierer, has tried to steer away from other right-wing groups, but the internal quarrels about the appropriate tactics go on.

Such heated debates are almost unheard-of in the *German People's Union* (DVU). This organisation has been clearly dominated by its founder and uncontested leader Gerhard Frey for almost 30 years in such a way that some observers are uncertain whether the DVU should be termed a party at all. Frey is a right-wing publisher who made a fortune with war novels, brochures on the «truth» about concentration camps, weekly newspapers, video tapes, flags and Nazi memorabilia. He is one of only three persons in the whole history of the Federal Republic who has ever been accused of misusing their constitutional right to free speech to provoke hate between nations and to undermine democracy, and actually faced the risk of losing this right (but was not convicted). In 1971 Frey founded the DVU as a kind of club for marketing his publications. As late as 1987, Frey formally transformed this club into a party. Even today the party's organisational structures are hardly separable from Frey's publishing company. Basically, the party members are still identical with the hardcore of those who subscribe to Frey's papers. The DVU owes large amounts of money to Frey's company which gives Frey even more control over the party.

From the official party manifesto (which is only six pages long, including an oath on the constitution and democracy in general) it is difficult to tell what the party actually stands for. The articles in Frey's newspapers are more revealing: Primarily, the DVU is a welfare chauvinist party that claims to protect the threatened interests of Germans in general and workers and small farmers in particular. Compared to the REP, one will find more references to the German past as well as more hidden racism and biologism in speeches and publications. The whole appearance of the DVU is more aggressive than that of the almost bourgeois REP.

The party did not field candidates in the general elections of 1990 and 1994 and received only about one percent in the general election of 1998, but won about six percent of the vote in the *Land* elections of Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein in the early '90s. It failed to overcome the five-percent hurdle in the Hamburg *Land* election of 1997 by only some 120 votes. Its biggest triumph so far has been the election of 1998 in the east German *Land* of Sachsen-Anhalt where the DVU received almost 13 percent of the vote after a very expensive campaign involving targeted mailshots and other means of «post-modern» campaign communication. However, in the months following this election the DVU did rather poorly in a couple of other eastern *Länder*. Therefore the Sachsen-Anhalt result was widely seen as an exception, which could be explained by low turnout and low levels of knowledge on what kind of party the DVU actually is. This points back to the fact that the DVU is a «virtual party»: Its structure is as centralised as possible within the constitutional and legal framework of Germany and its representatives at the municipal (if existent) and *Land* level are quite often not much more than puppets who completely lack any political experience. If the party has managed to acquire parliamentary representation, its MPs have usually proven unable to cope with their duties and responsibilities as politicians. Scandals, internal quarrels and even lawsuits are common problems of their parliamentary factions. In Sachsen-Anhalt a conflict between those MPs who are loyal to Frey and those who are not grew so intensive that nine out of 16 DVU representatives have left the party over the course of the last two years and formed a political sect of their own.

In conclusion, although the level of right-wing attitudes in the general public has been almost exponentially declining in Germany for more than 50 years, the support for right-wing parties has shifted in a wave-like pattern because the political opportunity structure for right-wingers has changed considerably several times. Whether the so-called «third wave» of support for the REP, DVU and NPD which started in the late '80s/early '90s will roll on unabated in the new millennium therefore seems to depend very much on external influences such as the position of the major parties on immigration, the level of more general political protest and last but not least the ruling of the federal constitutional court on the NPD which will directly or indirectly affect all right-wing extremist parties in Germany.

Kai Arzheimer (arzheimer@politik.uni-mainz.de)