

America's Opposite Hand: Germany's Parties Agree on the Necessity of Environmental Protection and a Green New Deal

By Alexander Ochs

- Where does U.S. environmental policy stand?
- How are environmental issues reflected in German party platforms?
- What will happen to German environmental leadership after the federal election?

"The political system pushes the parties toward the middle," "party homogeneity is rather weak" ... in Germany's antiquated libraries, students might pick up these messages from text books about the U.S. political system. We all know that today's reality is a different one. Over the last twenty-five years or so, the U.S. electorate has drifted further and further apart. The election of Ronald Reagan marks the beginning of the U.S. shift to the right in the 1980s. The two Bush presidents and even Bill Clinton—"it's the economy, stupid!"—continued Reagan's doctrine of the supremacy of a preferably untamed capitalism. The chimera of "the invisible hand of the market" has become an imperative of all political action, and arguably hit the "soft issue" of environmental protection even more than others. The U.S., once an environmental leader—the country with the first national environment plan, the birthplace of the idea of national parks, the place of departure for the global spread of the green movement in early 1970s—became the epitome of subordinating environmental protection under economic priorities.

To be sure, the U.S. in the mid-1980s became a leader in brokering a global treaty for the protection of the ozone layer—after Dupont had claimed the patents for the substitutes of ozone-depleting substances. When TIME magazine chose "Endangered Earth" as Person of the Year 1988, Bush Senior began referring to himself as the environmental president—albeit with limited credibility, the 1990 reform of the Clean Air Act notwithstanding. Clinton chose the greenest senator of all times, *Earth in the Balance* author Al Gore, as his vice president, but his sublime green agenda for the most part collapsed already in the first few years. Later on, he signed the Kyoto Protocol but never submitted it to the Senate for ratification because its defeat on the Hill was certain. Then Congress shifted toward a more pro-active stand on climate and green energy in the beginning of this century—mostly because even a Republican majority considered Bush Junior too much of a market radical.

Contract with America: Let 'em Pollute!

The successes of early U.S. environmental policy (cleaner water and air, the phase-out of dangerous chemicals, biodiversity protection, curbing urban sprawl) were immolated to a demonization of most government actions and agencies. America saw its own and very real tragedy of the commons: While U.S. citizens and organizations continued to dominate the global discourse about sustainability in all its elements—science, ethics, politics—the key determinants of its environmental policy at home were the deniers, including James Watts, John Sununu, Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms, and Dick Cheney. Their increasing ideological radicalism dominating the American Right over the course of the last twenty-five years alienated more and more Americans. The result was an expanding gap between progressive voters with blue majorities in most eastern and western coastal states and social conservatives with clear red majorities in between.

Only recently, the current seems to have changed again. Barack Obama became president with a pragmatic and decisively non-ideological platform aiming at unifying Americans across the aisle. The passage of the American Clean Energy and Security Act (HR 2454) in the House of Representatives on 26 June 2009, the first bill passing

either House of Congress that establishes a national cap on greenhouse gas emissions and creates a comprehensive clean energy strategy, might succeed as a historic milestone in the U.S. renovation of environmental leadership. With forty-four Democratic nays and eight Republican ayes, the two parties were no longer as clearly divided along party lines as they were in the past. To be sure, though, this has not been the last major rearguard battle by the opponents of vigorous climate policy in the United States. Many Representatives still lack the basic understanding of the issue, with a surprisingly large number of them citing scientific uncertainty as a reason for political hesitance—unthinkable in any other big country's parliament apart from, maybe, the Russian Duma.

Older comparative studies of political systems will characterize Germany's parliamentary democracy as one that is characterized by a rather wide spectrum of ideological variety and distinct unity within each party. Yet again, today's reality teaches a different lesson. Until the late 1970s a pretty stable system with the two large "people parties" existed, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU; in Bavaria: Christian-Social Union, CSU) and the labor party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) usually coalescing with the one and only smaller party, the Liberals (FDP), to form the federal government. This changed dramatically with the Green Party clearing the 5 percent hurdle necessary to enter the federal and some state (*Länder*) governments in the early 1980s.

Green Product Piracy

Germany was a rather slow starter in environmental policy, outshined in Europe at least by the Scandinavian countries. However, with the "The Greens" the peace and environment movement in Germany grew its parliamentary arm and disseminated its ideas into the German legislature. Their ideas increasingly have been absorbed by the other parties ever since. Today, all other major parties have taken over Green ideas including, most importantly, the phase-out of nuclear energy and, most recently, the Green New Deal as a solution to the current economic and financial crisis. Former environment minister and top Green party candidate Jürgen Trittin on a recent trip to Washington, D.C., alluded to product piracy being the current strategy of other parties.

Over the course of the last three decades, reversing the trend in the United States, Germany has become an environmental policy pioneer demonstrating leadership in many areas both at home and abroad. Accordingly, the German government has become a driving force in international climate negotiations. It set ambitious emission reduction targets at the national level (-40 percent until 2020 compared to 1990) and by calling for binding regulations at the international level, most prominently during Germany's successful EU presidency in the first half of 2007 and the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm. At the end of 2007, Germany had already reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 21.3 percent compared to 1990 (as a comparison, the U.S. is currently emitting more than 16 percent above 1990). The German government furthermore aims at increasing energy productivity by 3 percent per annum which means that energy will be used twice as efficiently in 2020 as in 1990.

In 2008, renewable energy sources in Germany covered 9.7 percent of total final energy consumption and 14.8 percent of total gross electricity consumption, numbers that would have been considered illusory only a few years ago. The government wants to further double the share of renewables to 30 percent of total gross electricity consumption by 2020 and increase it to 50 percent of primary energy by 2050. In 2009, approximately 280,000 people were employed in the renewable energy sector. According to some estimates, all environmental technologies together already account for Germany's largest job sector, ahead even of the car industry.

After the Election is Before the Election

So what will happen to German environmental leadership after the federal elections on 27 September this year? The short answer: It will continue. The main party's positioning

in the past as well as their election platforms only allow for this conclusion. In Germany's party spectrum today, three parties with legitimate aspirations to come in first, second, and third—i.e., the CDU/CSU, the SPD, and the Greens—mostly agree on the key issues of climate and energy protection. The CDU/CSU, currently the clear front runner (jointly collecting 38.2 percent of the vote in the recent elections for the European Parliament, EP), strengthened targets set in their 2007 party program again in their current election platform. The CDU/CSU has now formally acknowledged the key 2020 targets of its own current Grand Coalition and SPD environment minister Sigmar Gabriel: reduction of greenhouse gases by 40 percent (not only 30 percent) and a 30 percent (not 20 percent) share of renewables. What else would you expect of the party of Chancellor Angela Merkel whose first major political job on the federal level was environment minister? The SPD, whose EP election share of votes was 20.8 percent, goes beyond an environmental section in its election program. Gabriel and chancellor candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier just released a 10 point program for a social-ecologic modernization of the German economy. Green technologies and services would be the key for an economic recovery. A newly determined policy could produce a third industrial revolution and one million new jobs in the environmental sector.

The Greens, who achieved 12.1 percent of the votes in the EP elections, naturally and convincingly, are still the most environmentally progressive of German mainstream political parties. Pioneers of the compatibility of the economy and ecology, they just started a whole new line of publications and a worldwide series of events to promote the idea of a Green New Deal aiming at channeling capital flows into future-oriented fields and strengthening the real economy instead of highly speculative investments. "Only if the blue-collar workers become green-collar workers, there is a future for their industries" said Trittin on his recent visit to Washington. The Greens have long overcome the image of an assembly of backward-oriented utopists many Germans saw them as in the 1980s. Before the EP elections, the Greens were endorsed by the *Financial Times* and the financial section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*—daily newspapers not exactly known for their washy idealism.

And the Winner Is: the Environment?

With Merkel (1994-98) and Trittin (1998-2005), two former environment ministers compete with the party of the current office holder Gabriel (since 2005). The result: Greener campaigns on all sides than ever! To be sure, there are differences between the three parties: The CDU/CSU has abandoned its earlier nuclear-friendly positions. Unsurprisingly in a country where two-thirds of the population support the resolved phase-out of nuclear energy in the next two decades or earlier, the former Conservatives now officially calling themselves "Die Mitte" (the Middle), at present only want to slow down the phase-out of those German reactors considered safe. The CDU/CSU now dubs nuclear energy a bridge technology necessary as long as climate-friendly and efficient alternatives are not sufficiently available. What is more, the party wants to reinvest the largest part of additional benefits generated by the longer running reactors in research of efficiency and renewable energy—as well as lowering energy costs. It is foreseeable that a deferral of the nuclear phase-out is not acceptable for either the SPD or the Greens as potential coalition partners. The Greens would also oppose reducing the price of energy as they support the internalization of societal costs into the price of a resource, good, or service.

The Greens as a coalition partner of the CDU/CSU? Many Christian Democrats now seem interested, unthinkable in earlier federal elections. Indeed, there are already "black-green" coalitions on the state and local levels. In the city state of Hamburg, both parties cooperate quite successfully. Thus far, however, the Greens still wave off any such advances. Despite pointing out deficits of the federal SPD-led environment policy—the opposition to a speed limit on the Autobahn, exemptions for German industry under the European Emissions Trading Scheme—the Social Democrats are the Greens' favorite

partner. In fact, they are closer to the SPD not only with regard to nuclear, but also another controversial energy technology: Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCS), a process in which climate-altering carbon dioxide, a result of burning fossil fuels, is saved and stored underground before it would be emitted into the atmosphere. In contrast to the CDU/CSU, the SPD and Greens demand tight safety standards and liability schemes for the operating companies. The Greens are the most skeptical German party regarding CCS.

The Greens are Still the Greenest

In any case, a participation of the Green party in a German coalition government would signal the further development of the concept of economic modernization through enhanced environmental protection. The Greens are already developing new innovative green concepts waiting to be absorbed by its election competitors: an ecological vehicle tax, new standards for the chemical industry, and public investments in smart grids. The party has three key issues—social justice, liberty, and sustainability—and it is keen to emphasize that the last one is still its first among equals. SPD and CDU/CSU now both seem to be able to adjust to this doctrine. This is not only valid for the area of climate and energy. In other areas, the two *Volksparteien* (people's parties) are slowly approaching old Green goals as well, be it the protection of the Atlantic tide lands or the re-naturalization of Germany's rivers. Even in the area of genetic engineering, more and more of their key political figures are now opposing too much liberty for the industry.

With the FDP and "The Left", who garnered 11 percent and 7.5 percent in the EP elections, respectively, there are two remaining parties that also deserve attention. As for the former, it too has slightly shifted course more recently. Ecological and sustainable policy plays a bigger role in the party's "Program for Germany" than ever before. The FDP supports longer running periods of German nuclear reactors and lower regulations for CCS, but it does support ambitious European climate policy goals—although, and here the party shows some contradiction—it also wants to keep prices down. In matters of social redistribution and environmental regulation, the FDP has long become the party that is most neoliberal by ideology. The German Liberals are thus closest to the U.S. political Right. A downgrading of ambitious German environmental policy goals through a participation of the FDP in government is possible, however only under a single pact with the Conservatives. Even then, major renunciations will not happen; rather, a less ambitious German and more Europe-focused environmental agenda would be the consequence.

The story of the Left is quickly told: They want it all, but often it is not so clear *how* they want to get there. One example: The party demands a reduction of EU-wide greenhouse gas emissions of 40 percent until 2020—a very ambitious goal. For Germany, it envisions the same goal in the same timeframe. This, however, is extremely unrealistic. The EU redistributes its joint target individually, with the richer countries reducing more and the poorer less. The Left also wants to nationalize the entire electricity and gas grids, phase-out reactors immediately, and produce all energy from renewables by 2050 latest. With these goals, a participation of the Left in whatever coalition—as improbable as it is—is obviously not likely to downgrade German environmental leadership ambitions.

Agreement on an International Agreement

The upcoming federal elections are not very likely to change the overall course of German environmental policy. Only in the case of an FDP-CDU/CSU coalition can we expect that the parties will at certain points rather try to reduce additional costs for the consumer of environmental resources than the consumption of environmental resources themselves. If the Greens are involved in a coalition government, they will push the government's domestic aspirations. If Greens and Liberals are involved—which is not entirely unlikely at this point—we can expect the Greens to give up goals in other fields as a trade-off for environmental goals, due to the importance of the topic for the party. As

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for the international sphere, we can expect most German governments to support a continuation of European leadership in climate policy including at the UN climate summit in Copenhagen at the end of this year when a successor treaty for the Kyoto Protocol will be negotiated. After all, every major German party has long supported the long-term goal of keeping global warming below two degrees Celsius, a level that scientists believe could prevent the most dangerous effects of climate change. The U.S. political system has not yet produced such agreement. Still, don't throw out those old textbooks yet—if they don't explain the present, they might tell you the future.

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