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What factors explain voter behavior in the 2009 election?

How did gender, age, and employment differences influence voters' decisions?

The 2009 Election: A New Coalition for Germany

An Analysis Based on Data from
Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim

By Dieter K. Roth

The Election Results

One major result of the election was the dramatic decline of the two *Volksparteien*, or "catch-all parties." The Social Democratic Party (SPD) lost 11.2 percentage points from the previous election while the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) dropped by 1.4 percent. Together, their share fell from 69 percent of the votes in 2005 to 57 percent in 2009. If we take all eligible voters, as a basis of electoral success, their combined share is now under 40 percent and thus they can no longer be described as "catch-all-parties." For the last few decades, the two parties stood for stability in Germany and garnered more than 90 percent of the votes in the 1970s; they are now mid-sized parties that received only 16 percent (SPD) and 23.5 percent (CDU/CSU) of eligible voters, respectively. At the same time we have three small parties each earning over 10 percent of the votes, with a combined share of 37.2 percent. This has never happened before. The election reinforced the five party system (considering the CDU and CSU as one party since they form one parliamentary group) and instigated a comeback of the old political "Lager" situation, left camp versus right camp, as the five parties stuck to the similar coalition politics of 2005.

The election results in eastern Germany differed as the established parties fared better in the west. The SPD received over six percentage points more while the three others (CDU, FDP, Greens) followed with an additional 4.5 points. This resulted in 28.5 percent support for the Linke, or Left Party, in eastern Germany. This was on par with the support for the CDU. The losses of the SPD were greater in the east (-12.5 points) than in the west (-11 points). The CDU/CSU lost 2.8 points in western Germany and the CSU, based in Bavaria, lost 6.6 percentage points. On the other hand, the CDU gained 4.5 points in the east while the Greens and the FDP benefited much more in the west.

Twenty-nine parties ran for the election. Together, five of them received 94 percent of the votes with the twenty-four other parties earning 6 percent. Nevertheless, two parties are worth mentioning: a new party, the Pirate Party (*die Piraten*), is a one-issue party that fights for absolute freedom on the Internet. They got only 2 percent of the votes; however, from young males under thirty they took in more than 10 percent. Of the far-right parties, three of them ran and together got 2 percent of the votes. The most successful of these was the National Democratic Party (NPD), which received 1.1 percent in the west and 3.1 percent in the east.

The 2009 election in Germany had the lowest turnout since the first federal election (72.3% in the west = -6.2 points and 64.8% in the east = -9.5 points). In comparison to 2005, more than 4 million voters did not vote. This is—aside from structural reasons for lower turnouts—a sign of protest especially geared toward the former two big parties as the analysis of voter change demonstrates.

Another election result is that parties left of the center, which had a majority in 1998,

2002, and in 2005, lost the majority to the parties right of the center. But both “Lager” are still rather close (45.6% and 48.4%).

The distribution of seats in the Bundestag shows that the new coalition of Christian Democrats and Free Democrats has a rather sturdy majority of 332 seats in comparison to the 290 seats for the opposition parties. This distribution of seats is much clearer than the lead in percentage points due to the electoral law, which grants 24 surplus seats (*Überhangmandate*) for the Christian Democrats, as it was calculated. This happens when a party gets more direct seats (first vote) than it should get according to the distribution of second votes. (This electoral law was declared unconstitutional in summer 2008 and must be changed before January 2011). A petition by the Greens to change the law in June 2009 failed.

How Can We Explain the Outcome of the Election?

If we follow the famous Michigan or Ann Arbor model to explain individual voting behavior, we have to consider three bundles of influential factors: party identification as long-term influences, which is a measurement of the socio-structural bindings to a party of individual voters; second, the influence of issues, as short-term influences, position- and valence-issues, and the competence of parties to solve such issues; and third, another bundle of short-term influences, the candidates, their leadership qualities, and the images of candidates.

Party identification (PI) in Germany dropped heavily in the last thirty years and in the meantime we have close to 40 percent of the electorate that has no identification with any party. This is an enormous potential of floating voters; during this election in particular, the running parties varied in their success of attracting this potential. If we compare the size of party identifiers in each party in the Bundestag with their final success we notice a very small gain for the SPD of 2 percentage points, about 6 points for the Christian Democrats, but 11 points for the Free Democrats, 9 points for the Linke, and 5 points for the Greens. This means that the old *Volksparteien* with rather high figures of party identifiers are stuck with longtime supporters and are not successful in attracting additional voters for the necessary majority required to accomplish governmental power, whereas the small parties, formerly without a stable basis of identifiers to make even the 5 percent hurdle, get many more non-identifiers. And with this success they get into a power situation where they are needed to form a government.

Let us turn to the influence of the candidates. Although in Germany a majority of voters still vote for parties and not for candidates, the influence of leading figures on voters' decisions is growing. Even more important is that it is higher among supporters of the Christian Democrats than that of the supporters of the Social Democrats.

At the same time Angela Merkel, as the incumbent, was far ahead of her challenger Frank-Walter Steinmeier. This lead was bigger than any previous lead of a former Christian Democratic candidate with respect to a challenger of the Social Democrats. It was even bigger than the lead of former chancellor Gerhard Schröder to Angela Merkel in the 2005 election. The lack of support for Angela Merkel in 2005 among female voters and those in eastern Germany no longer exists, but is turned around such that a majority in these groups now backs her. This is an important change and had a major influence on the 2009 result.

Seventy-eight percent of the electorate said in the week of the election that Angela Merkel was doing a “good job” as chancellor. Such high figures are not achieved only with the positive judgments of their party followers and, in fact, majorities within voters of the Linke (58%) and the Greens (65%) agreed she was doing a good job—and even 77

percent of the SPD voters thought so.

With regard to leadership qualities such as credibility, assertiveness, and expertise, or the ability to carry out specific political aims such as creating jobs, fighting the economic crisis, and solving future problems, Angela Merkel gets higher approval ratings than Frank-Walter Steinmeier, but in most other cases the electorate sees no difference in their abilities. Both politicians had a rather strong reputation for solving political problems, but Merkel had an advantage.

The most important political problems that still have to be solved, according to the voters, are unemployment, other economic issues and the financial crisis, education and schools, and family questions concerning kids and youth. Nevertheless, the general economic situation of the country is not seen as worse than four years ago; on the contrary, it seems slightly better than in 2005. In addition, voters describe their personal economic situation as rather good. In other words, the general economic crisis and the consequences of the financial crisis have not yet arrived in the German electorate so far.

When one asks whether the Christian or the Social Democrats can better solve the important political questions (there are still very low competence measures for the three smaller parties) one notices a similar picture as with the political leaders. The Christian Democrats have a slight advantage among voters to solve economic problems and the Social Democrats have support in matters of social security, but in most cases a majority says no party is able to solve the problem at all or they just don't know whether the problem can be solved and by whom. This leads to the result that issues and the economic crisis did not play a major role in this election because voters do not yet feel the crisis.

With respect to candidate influences we find that Angela Merkel had a rather strong chancellor bonus, which helped her and her party. Steinmeier had a good reputation but this was not enough to fight the general trend against his party. The declining PI and the inability of the two big parties to attract non-identifiers played a big role in the losses of the former catch-all Christian and Social Democratic parties.

Who Voted for Whom?

Exit poll data of the Forschungsgruppe show interesting details of voting behavior: The Christian Democrats lost nearly 4 percentage points among males but won 1 point with females. The SPD lost more with females than with males. The FDP won much more with males than females, the same is true for the Linke, and it was the other way around for the Greens. This means that the Christian Democrats are a party, as in the beginning of the old Bundesrepublik, that is dominated by female voters (36% female to 31% male), the FDP is dominated by males (17% male to 13% female), and the Greens are still female dominated but even stronger (13% female to 9% male).

In the age group 30 and under, the SPD lost 18 percentage points, which is more than half of what they had. The three former small parties won 4 or 5 points but the other parties, such as the Pirates, had their best results in this age group. Among voters over 60 the gains and losses were rather smooth. This is still the terrain of the old *Volksparteien*. The CDU/CSU won 42 percent and the SPD 28 percent. Among those unemployed, the Linke was the strongest party with 31 percent and the SPD received 19% with a loss of 14 points in comparison to 2005. But the CDU/CSU lost 4 points as well. Another interesting group is the one of "trainees" (similar to the voters below 30): The Christian Democrats lost 3 percentage points, the SPD 19 points and the other parties won 9 points, most of them again were voters for the Pirates.

What do Germans Think About the Election after the Election?

Fifty-three percent of the German electorate are satisfied with the outcome while 40 percent are not. The followers of all the parties left of the center are not satisfied with the SPD at 80 percent, the Linke at 73 percent, and the Greens with 66 percent, although both of the smaller parties received a two digit result. In 2005, 80 percent of the voters were not satisfied with the outcome of the election, which ultimately ended in a grand coalition.

When eligible voters were asked before the election what coalition they preferred, the picture was unclear. Around 40 percent were for a black-yellow coalition and the same percentage could be measured for a grand coalition of Christian and Social Democrats. One week after the election 46 percent said a black-yellow coalition was good and 33 percent said it was bad. This is not a sign of overwhelming support for the new coalition but people are realistic and they will accept the government in the long run.

The dramatic losses for the Social Democrats bring into question the future course of the party and whether it will move to the left, to the right, or will there be no major change. In polls by the Forschungsgruppe 57 percent said that the SPD will move to the left while 29 percent said there would be no major change.

If you ask people where the SPD *should* move you get a different figure: 37 percent say to the left, 33 percent say there should be no change, and 17 percent say they should move to the right. The distribution of these results among party followers within the SPD differs only slightly. And if asked whether the SPD should move closer to the Linke, the old taboo is still working: 56 percent of the adult German population said no and 36 percent said yes. A small majority within the SPD, 51 percent, said no while 44 percent said yes.

The discussion about the establishment of a new younger generation for the SPD continues. Sigmar Gabriel is the only candidate in the race for party leadership and has the support of 40 percent of SPD voters. This again is not an overwhelming amount of support. The broader public is even less interested in this question as almost 39 percent said they don't care.

In the middle of coalition negotiations voters were also asked whether the new government should, despite the economic crisis, lower taxes for employees. Sixty-four percent said yes and 32 percent said no. When asked what the new government will actually do, the public is distrustful that these campaign promises will be kept. Sixty-nine percent said that the new government will not lower taxes—this includes majorities within the party followers of the CDU/CSU and the FDP.

What Will Happen In The Near Future?

Although the new coalition is still fighting over political programs for the legislative period and finding the financial resources to do it, they will have more conflicts within the coalition for the next six months than with the three opposition parties.

The SPD has its own internal problems and will be paralyzed for some time; the two smaller parties have different concepts of opposition work. The topics which will continue to be causes of conflict in the coalition are the future of the health system and questions on social welfare. The positions of the coalition partners, CSU and FDP, are quite opposite and this is even more true regarding questions of domestic security and civil rights. There might be an agreement for tax reform, but all governments have undertaken tax reforms without long-lasting results or success. The protection laws

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against dismissal are another topic that might cause infighting between the coalition partners. There will certainly be growing problems between the chancellor's office and the foreign ministry.

The next important election is in May of 2010 in North Rhine-Westphalia, the biggest of the sixteen German states. The new coalition will try to avoid a possible backlash and Mr. Rüttgers, the head of the black-yellow government in NRW, is anxious to point out the social components of the federal coalition contract. The majority coalition in the second chamber, the Bundesrat, would be gone, if the Christian Democrats and/or the Free Democrats lose this election.

There will be a much stronger headwind for Angela Merkel in the future although she wants to be the chancellor for all Germans, as she said during the election night. The followers of the SPD will find out that she is no longer the friendly chancellor of a grand coalition. The new Politbarometer in October already shows a rather big drop in her approval rates compared to the week after the election. The same is true for Guido Westerwelle, who will become the next foreign minister. He will begin with no experience but will have good advisers. He will stay in the shadow of Chancellor Merkel, who will keep the guidelines of politics in her hands, especially in the area of foreign politics.

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