Peifer on Langenbacher, 'Launching the Grand Coalition: The 2005 Bundestag Elections and the Future of German Politics'

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The Significance of the 2005 Election

The 2005 Bundestag elections injected a sense of excitement into the often staid German political landscape.[1] Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, in response to a string of regional electoral defeats culminating in the Social Democrats' loss of North Rhine-Westphalia in May 2005, forced an early national election by staging and deliberately losing a vote of confidence in the Bundestag. This unprecedented maneuver set the stage for a suspenseful election campaign during which Angela Merkel and the Christian Democrats frittered away an impressive double-digit lead over the Social Democrats to cross the electoral finish line neck to neck with their main rival. Merkel's gender, her East German origins, and her leadership style attracted commentary throughout the campaign, adding to the drama of an election season that featured a new Left Party and a reinvigorated Free Democratic party. Germany's two largest parties--the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Socialist Union of Bavaria (CDU/CSU) and the German Social Democratic party (the SPD)--received the lowest percentage of the popular vote they had received in decades, with the Greens suffering a moderate loss in the popular vote and the Free Democrats (FDP) and new Left Party significantly increasing their share of the vote. Political pundits speculated about exotic party coalitions such as a "Jamaican Coalition" of Greens, FDP, and CDU/CSU (whose party colors of green, yellow, and black make up the Jamaican flag) or a red-yellow-green "traffic light coalition" of the SPD, FDP, and Greens even as Merkel, Schröder, and party leaders hammered out the parameters of Germany's second "Grand Coalition" government.

Launching the Grand Coalition analyzes the significance of Germany's 2005 election. The volume consists of nine chapters, eight of which were previously published in the "Special Issue on the 2005 Bundestag Election" of German Politics and Society (Spring 2006), with the final chapter drawn from the fall volume of the journal. Reissuing these articles, written in the immediate aftermath of the election, in book form raises two questions: have the interpretations and analyses of the authors stood the test of time, and will readers find the volume as a whole to be an enduring and insightful addition to their bookshelves?

Turning to the first question, one must look at the entries individually. A number of articles advance structural analyses that remain useful, while others feel dated in that they pose questions about potential coalition policies without the benefit of examining the Grand Coalition's record of performance since 2005. Given the uneven nature of the contributions, the collection starts on a
strong note, with a lively, engaging essay by Eric Langenbacher that makes the case that the election of 2005 deserves special attention. The first two chapters focus on the outcome of the 2005 election, yet provide explanations and interpretations that remain insightful. David Conradt examines the declining appeal of the SPD and CDU/CSU, the major parties that dominated the Bonn Republic. Conradt notes that the combined popular vote of these broad-based parties dipped to its lowest proportion since 1949, in large part due to a shrinking core constituency of church-going Catholics for the CDU and unionized industrial workers for the SPD. Conradt evaluates why Germany's smaller parties have been able to chip away steadily at the dominance of their mainstream rivals, with his analysis focusing more on demographics and the dynamics of Germany's electoral system than on the issues and policy prescriptions that set the parties apart. Hermann Schmitt and Andreas Wüst, in the following chapter, provide a more detailed look at the specific issues of 2005, and analyze how short-term factors interacted with longer-term trends. They likewise note that split voting served to weaken Germany's mainstream parties, and posit that the party preferences of German voters will become even less predictable in the future.

Ludger Helms shifts the focus from the declining fortunes of the SPD and CDU to the issue of coalition governance in his contribution, "The Grand Coalition: Precedents and Prospects." Drawing upon the historical experience of the Kurt Georg Kiesinger grand coalition government of 1966-69, Helms offers some thoughts on inter-governmental decision-making, executive-legislative relations, and policy agendas. Given that the Merkel government had just been formed at the time, Helms' comparison between the Kiesinger and Merkel grand coalitions was preliminary and needs updating to reflect the successes and failures of the German government since 2005. Dorothee Heisenberg's examination of Merkel's EU policy and Jackson Janes's essay on transatlantic relations were fresh and insightful in 2005, but have been overtaken by events. Readers interested in Germany's EU policies and the transatlantic relationship will want to consult more recent studies that examine the 2007 G-8 meeting at Heiligendamm, Merkel's North Atlantic Free Trade zone initiative, the impact of the 2007 French national elections, and ongoing United States-EU diplomacy regarding Iran, NATO, and Afghanistan.

Lars Rensmann contribution on right-wing parties during the 2005 election cycle remains relevant, as does Jeffrey Kopstein and Daniel Ziblatt's piece on the enduring legacy of German unification. While focusing on the 2005 elections, both contributions provide structural analysis that point to longer-term trends and challenges. Rensmann argues that the extreme Right has been incapable of modernizing its appeal, allowing the Left to tap into insecurities related to globalization and Europeanization more effectively. Adept at creating an identity-generating subculture distinguished by racist rock music, dress codes, and behavioral norms, the extreme Right was unable to capitalize on its 2004 regional successes in Brandenburg (6.1 percent of the vote) and Saxony (9.2 percent) during the 2005 national elections. Kopstein and Ziblatt argue that fifteen years after Germany's unification, two coherent party systems have emerged, one in the East and one in the West. They contend that at the national level, two different voting patterns combine to produce incoherent results, as platforms that appeal to western voters offend easterners, while the Left Party generated little attraction in western areas. Kopstein and Ziblatt predict that this divide will endure unless the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats develop new electoral strategies.

Myra Marx-Ferree and Clay Clemens both focus on Merkel in their respective contributions. Marx-Ferree addresses the issue of gender in "Angela Merkel: What does it Mean to Run as a Woman?"
while Clemens examines Merkel's role as opposition leader during the period 2000-05. Marx-Ferree addresses changing expectations for women in public life, shifting definitions of “women's interests,” and challenges women face in navigating "old boys' networks" without alienating female networks and interest groups. Marx-Ferree's central argument is that while Merkel may not consider herself a feminist, as Germany's first female chancellor one must nonetheless understand her role and function in that way. Clemens provides perhaps the best chapter of the collection in his analysis of Merkel in opposition. His analysis of Merkel's leadership style, her analytical objectivity, grasp of detail, and wariness of dogma suggest that Merkel should not be underestimated. Both chapters whet the reader's interest in Merkel as a woman, conservative politician, and easterner. Merkel's multifaceted identity will no doubt generate longer and detailed studies, but Marx-Ferree and Clemens provide two excellent essays on the Merkel factor in the 2005 elections.

Specialists on the German party system and electoral politics will find this volume a useful addition to their libraries, providing a handy snapshot of Germany's political landscape during the run-up to and in the immediate aftermath of the 2005 elections. The collection does a marvelous job raising the questions and challenges of Germany's second experiment of grand coalition governance from the perspective of 2005, yet the timeliness of the articles (chapters) precluded an assessment of that government in action. Those seeking broader analyses of German foreign policy issues, social trends, or themes such as immigration, Islam, and economic reform will find individual chapters (or the original journal articles) useful, but as a collected volume, this work has a limited shelf-life fast approaching expiration.

Note

[1]. The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.