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A Wurst in Every Icebox:
The 1957 German Election

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Flockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The German Federal Republic's third national election was almost an anti-climax to the rough campaign which preceded it. Following two months of rip-snorting exchanges between the two major parties, slightly more than 88 per cent of the nation's 35,000,000 eligible voters went piously to the polls last Sunday. As expected, they re-elected the patriarch.

There were no street riots or shootings such as took place on Election Day in the Weimar Republic. There were no belligerent parades such as those at the beginning of the Hitler Era.

By midnight, it was plain that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Coalition had won a substantial victory.

However, it was not a "landslide", as some eager foreign correspondents called it. The Adenauer party already had 45.2 per cent of the vote from the 1953 election - plenty of land. This year's election pushed the Christian Democratic Union up to 50.2 per cent, or 15,000,000 votes. A gain of 5 per cent is not an avalanche.

Next in line was the hapless Social Democratic Party, with 31.8 per cent, or 9,500,000 votes. The S.P.D. gained 3 per cent over its 1953 stand. However, it remains the "eternal opposition."

The other five national parties came off sadly. Reinhold Maier's Free Democrats, who hoped to be the decisive factor between the two big parties, emerged with not quite 8 per cent. The Deutsche Partei, a subservient partner in the Coalition, got 3 per cent. The Refugee Party, once a potent interest group, received 4.6 per cent, and the reactionary Deutsche Reichs-Partei got barely 1 per cent.

In other words, this election put West Germany on the high road to a two-party system. The splinter parties, each wanting to be a "third force", were decimated. Millions of voters had gravitated to the two major parties. Today, only the S.P.D. and the C.D.U. remain as effective political forces.

The election also gave 81-year-old Chancellor Adenauer an overwhelming mandate to continue his unconditionally pro-American foreign policy and his free-swinging free enterprise economy. It gave a national affirmative to the Adenauer theory that only a "policy of strength" will succeed with Russia in the grim struggle for Germany's reunification. And it probably gave John Foster Dulles' blood pressure a break.

An election answers a lot of questions about the future of a nation. But it doesn't answer all of them.

Among the questions left unanswered by this election are:

- 1--When will the Germans learn to leave "doctrines" out of what should be a fundamentally undoctrinaire exercise - a national election?
- 2--What happens when the aged Chancellor dies? Will the religion of his successor affect the unity of the interconfessional Christian Democratic Union? Does West Germany's "Chancellor Democracy" have the built-in weakness of Bismarck's Reich - namely, a system of government which only a strongman can run?
- 3--What will become of the Social Democratic Party? Will it continue to follow its unrealistic course towards radical leftist policies - or will it develop into a responsible, viable Opposition?
- 4--Will the tender plant of democracy be able to survive future storms in Germany - a depression; the Irrendentist passion for reunification; increased pressure from the Kremlin; the demagogues who pop up in every free republic?

Here is a glance in passing at the major parties and the issues of this election:

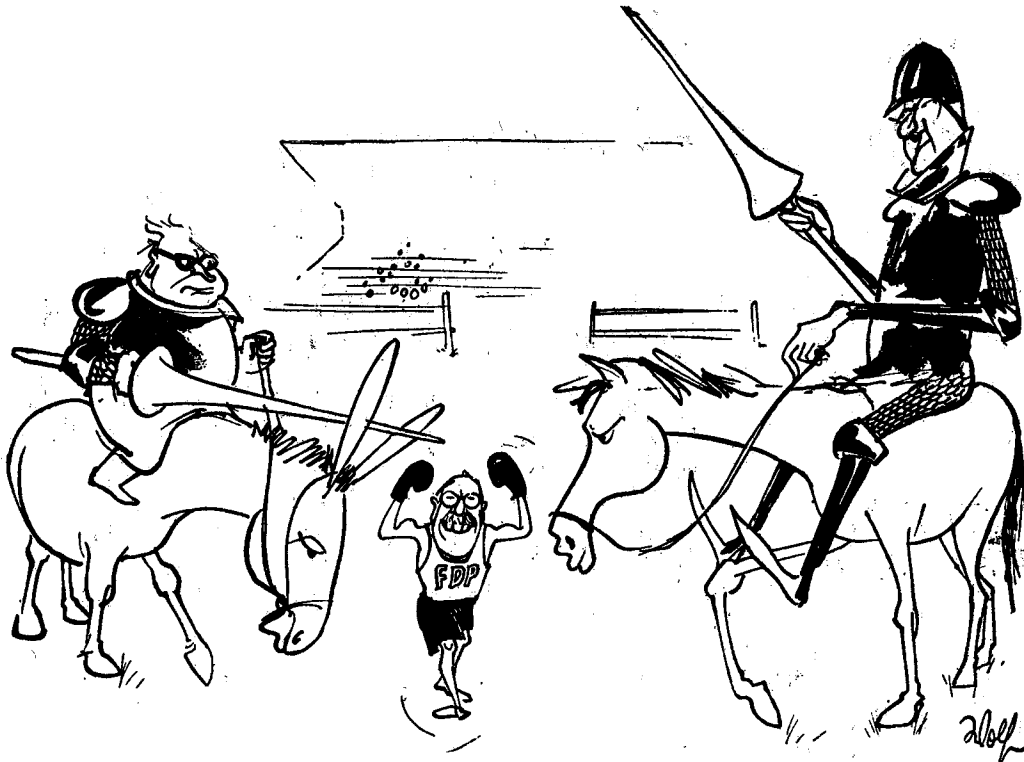
The Christlich-Demokratische Union is a new party. It dates only from 1945. It is the first German political party with a religious orientation that includes large numbers of both Catholics and Protestants. In its social outlook, the C.D.U. is the heir to the 100-year-old tradition of German social Catholicism begun by Bishop Emmanual Ketteler (DB - 8). Its interconfessional nature is the result of the common persecution experienced by the two major faiths under the Nazi regime. Today, the C.D.U. is a broad-based group which includes liberals from the trade union movement, conservative industrialists, religionists of many stripes, peasants, shopkeepers, ex-soldiers, and most of Germany's old ladies. It has a bright array of political personalities besides the popular Chancellor - including Economics Minister Ludwig Erhard, Defense Minister Franz Josef Strauss, and Foreign Minister Heinrich Brentano.

The Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands is an old party for Germany - 88 years old to be exact. It began as a radical Marxist party opposing the nationalist-conservative Reich. It was banned by Bismarck in 1878 for two years. Rooted though it was in the class-conscious German workers' movement, the S.P.D. grew strong enough to seize power after the German collapse in 1918. A year later, the S.P.D. polled 45 per cent of the vote. During the Hitler Era, the party was forced to go underground. Its leaders were thrown in concentration camps. Many died. In 1945 the party re-emerged with more than its share of democrats. Unfortunately for its welfare at the polls, the S.P.D. also had more than its share of socialists. Post-war Germany has apparently made a complete break with its political past. The S.P.D. is the only West Germany party obliged to carry the baggage of history with it. This has become more of a handicap than a help. Today the S.P.D. still draws most of its strength from the workers. A smattering of intellectuals and lower middle class elements has aided slightly in broadening its base. But the party has yet to win wide support among all elements of the nation. The S.P.D. is poor in personalities. Three of its major post-war leaders have died in recent years.

The issues of this election centered on foreign policy. For the past eight years, the Adenauer Coalition has pursued a consistent, almost wooden policy of friendship and even servitude to the United States and Western Europe. This has resulted in staunch German commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization - a promise of 15 army divisions, mutual defense, the loan of bases. It has resulted in zealous German participation in pan-European schemes - the European Common Market, Euratom, the Montan Union.

In reality, none of these commitments was up for grabs in the election - Adenauer's claims to the contrary. The S.P.D. could not break the 20-year N.A.T.O. pacts if it held the reins of government. At most, it could alter them.

But foreign policy was nevertheless in the spotlight. The C.D.U. trumpeted: "No Experiments." In other words, keep on the old course. Maintain the strong alliance to the West. Deal with the Russians in the "only language they understand" - force. Be patient about reunification; the Russians will give in when they recognize our relentless will and strength.



"The Third Force" - Hopeful Reinhold Maier between the heavyweights, Ollenhauer and Adenauer.

The Social Democrats lambasted the Government's policy as "inflexible", "obstinate", and "a dead-end". They proposed a loosening up of Russo-German relations. Not neutrality, not a vacuum of power, said S.P.D. party chairman Erich Ollenhauer, but rather an all-European security system including states on both sides of the Iron Curtain - with guarantees from Russia and the United States.

A second S.P.D. argument bore some resemblance to a plank in Adlai Stevenson's luckless platform - that on nuclear weapons. The Social Democrats called Adenauer the "Atomic Death Chancellor" because the old man wants to get nuclear weapons for the Bundesrepublik. This became clear last July when the C.D.U. torpedoed a Bundestag bill which would have limited all German nuclear developments to peacetime purposes. The S.P.D. claimed that nuclear weapons in Germany will loose an atomic attack by the Russians. Their campaign speakers spent a lot of time picturing the awful effects nuclear weapons would have on German cities. And they scornfully cited one of Adenauer's utterances that nuclear weapons "are nothing but a further development of artillery."

Actually, the S.P.D. wasn't quite clear about its foreign policy program. Some radical party members went so far as to denounce N.A.T.O. outright and to demand negotiations on reunification between Bonn and Pankow, the seat of the East German puppet government. This latter scheme is exactly what the Soviets have been pulling for. The S.P.D.'s lack of clarity on foreign affairs played into the hands of the C.D.U.

National issues seemed tame by comparison to the overriding international ones.

The C.D.U. played it safe by beating the drums for its "record of achievement" - the Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle), a new social security law, aid to farmers under a new agricultural bill, the general rise in Germany's standard of living. They made next to no promises for the future. "Welfare For All" was the slogan. Some C.D.U. speakers interpreted this to mean that the government would take care of those economic and professional groups who hadn't gotten their share of the pie as yet - the tax-burdened middle class and the small farmers.

The S.P.D. countered with some vague recipes for "more equal distribution of the wealth." Their campaign speeches hammered on the theme that West Germany has "too many millionaires" - that "15 per cent of the population owns 90 per cent of the nation's property." They proposed tougher government controls on industrial cartels, stronger price controls to halt inflation, government ownership of all public power installations, and tax reforms.

Beyond these relatively concrete issues, the election brought several bad-tasting abstractions into the arena. These were the issues of doctrine. The C.D.U. started it early last summer when Chancellor Adenauer flatly declared that an S.P.D. victory would mean "the downfall of Germany."

With hints, allusions, innuendoes, and ominous warnings, he expanded this thesis to a point where it was clear he was calling the S.P.D. "Communists." Two days before the election, the downfall of Germany became "the downfall of Europe." All this boiled down to dirty campaign tactics.

Then the German Catholic Church entered the arena with similar admonitions. Several bishops declared that "no conscientious Christian can vote for a socialist or liberal." The battle-lines were drawn. From the pulpit and the hustings, C.D.U. supporters clamored for the defeat of the "godless Marxist party," and its anti-Christian doctrines.

Stung by these accusations, the S.P.D. retaliated with assertions that Adenauer was leading West Germany into "clerical fascism." They accused the Chancellor of trying to institute "one-party rule." S.P.D. posters suggested that he was a second Hitler. They denounced Adenauer's close ties with the Catholic Church and hinted that a "fascist corporative state" was in the offing.

There is, perhaps, a grain of truth in the assertion that the S.P.D. is tinctured with Marxism. There is, perhaps, a grain of truth in the assertion that Adenauer seeks one party rule tainted with clericalism. But only a grain.

Neither of the major parties has cornered the market on democracy. But the campaign charges based on Weltanschauung (doctrine) are all rather far-fetched. Their immediate effect on the electorate was probably negligible. However, these accusations did poison the atmosphere. And they intensified the suspicion and intolerance which still dominate German politics.

This is not to say that the professional politicians were affected by the battle of doctrines. On the contrary, they probably took little notice of them. But the ultimate effect on 50,000,000 Germans cannot be regarded as negligible. Doctrines in politics play on responsive emotional chords in the masses - hate and fear, among others. The last time Germany fiddled with doctrines in an election was 1933. The hideous results should be a warning.

Mundane as it may seem, the German election simply substantiated an old political truism: you can't beat prosperity. Fifty per cent of the West Germans appear to be very pleased with the way things are going for them. They drive cars and ride motorcycles. They watch television on their own sets - a million of them so far. They wear new shoes and suits. And they have plenty of wurst in the ice-box.

Foreign policies, doctrines, and taxes aside, most of the 15,000,000 C.D.U. voters chose to have "four more years." We can sneer at this materialism - but didn't we pick the Republicans last year?

David Binder
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