

DB - 17
"Fifty-fifty": (Part I)
Election in District 133

Plockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Three months ago, some 132,000 voters in and around Giessen went to the polls to elect a local candidate for the Bundestag. There were five men running for the parliamentary office, but only two were rated as possible winners. As it worked out, one of them ostensibly won by a hair's breadth margin. He is now serving his second term as Abgeordneter (deputy) from District 133.

Yet it's still not absolutely certain that the victor may keep his narrowly gained spoils. A week after the September 15 election, there was a recount. Since then, the loser has nursed his flickering hopes by entering all sorts of complaints to the federal election commission. But at this writing it appears 99 and 44/100ths per cent sure that the man now sitting in Bonn will stay there.

Thus on the face of it, the local election was by no means typical of the national election in which Konrad Adenauer's coalition swept 54 per cent of the vote and left the opposition Social Democrats with a scant 31 per cent. However, there were some factors at play here in Giessen which are characteristic of post-war German politics. And in respect to them, a look at the local election is synonymous with a look at the national one.

Without further ado, here is an unwashed analysis of the cleanest election this side of Harlan County, Ky., complete with bobtailed comments on: Demography; Issues; Candidates; Campaigns; Tallying; and the Post Mortem.

Demography

Election District 133 is, like most of its brother districts in the Bundesrepublik, a conglomerate. It was hastily pasted together following World War II. The district embraces the two Hessian counties of Giessen and Alsfeld; the former heavily industrialized and the latter agricultural. At the western end is the commercial city of Giessen (population 62,000). At the eastern end is the market town of Alsfeld (population 10,000). The rolling farm and timberland between is dotted with small villages - nearly 200 of them. More than half of the district's 216,300 citizens live in towns which have less than 3,000 inhabitants.

The district's division of labor is fairly well-balanced. Industry, located principally in and around Giessen, employs 38 per cent of the population.

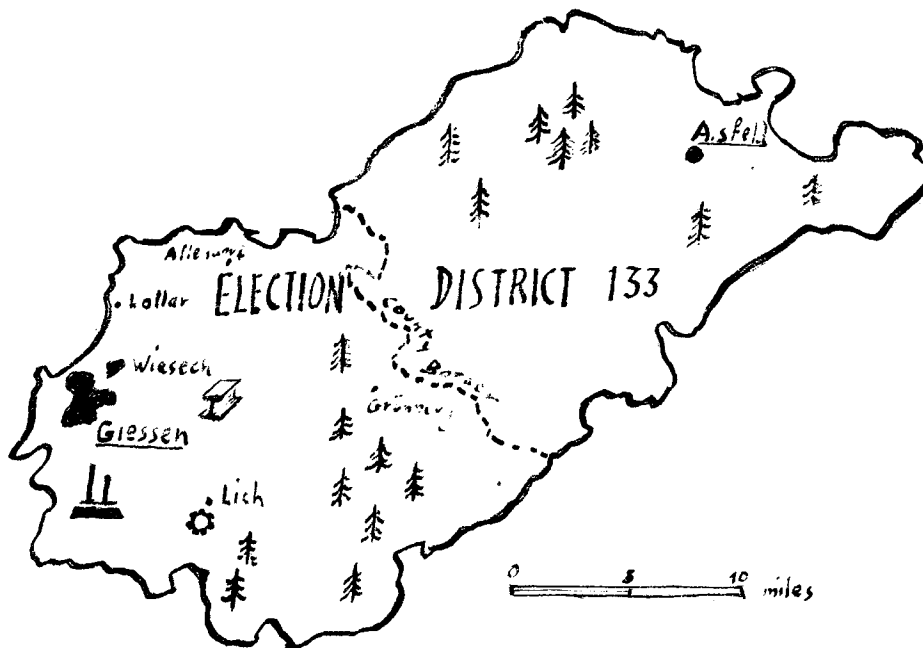
This labor group, thoroughly unionized in the city as well as in the factory towns like Lollar, Lich, Treis, Heuchelheim, and Hungen, is oriented strongly to the Social Democratic Party (S.P.D.). About 21 per cent of the inhabitants are farmers. In Giessen Landkreis (county) the farmers lean heavily to the S.P.D. In Alsfeld Landkreis the agricultural population has been traditionally conservative; - since the war giving a majority to the Adenauer coalition. Equally conservative is the next population group - the white collar workers and civil servants. These so-called Beamten comprise 14 per cent. Finally, there are the Pensionierter, the people living on social security or income, who make up 19 per cent of the population in the two counties. They are mildly conservative.

The division between the confessions weighs heavily in favor of the Lutheran Church, which registers 77 per cent of the population in the district. The Catholic Church has 21 per cent. This lopsidedness contrasts to the fifty-fifty balance between the confessions throughout the Federal Republic. Locally, the Catholic minority figure becomes meaningful when one notes the size of the vote for the Christian Democratic Union in the 1953 election. The C.D.U. has had the warm blessing of the Catholic Church ever since its inception in 1945. Four years ago this party drew 28 per cent of the vote in District 133. Assuming that nearly all of the district's Catholics voted the C.D.U. ticket, the Protestant additive would have amounted to a scant six or seven per cent.

Local observers, and a couple of sample polls confirm this assumption. Instead of following the course of many German Protestants who joined with Catholics in creating the Christian "Union" party, local Lutherans took another path. Up through 1953, these aboriginal Protestants placed their faith in the right-wing Free Democratic Party. Since then, events have occurred which have tended to drive orthodox Lutherans into the generous embrace of the Adenauer coalition. But more of that later.

Religion is a neutral element in the S.P.D. In the first place, German Catholics were warned by their bishops not to vote for the socialists. It is doubtful that many Catholics failed to heed this advice. With a glance back at the Lutheran enrollment figure in District 133 (77 per cent), it is plain that most Social Democrats are registered Lutherans. However, neither the party nor the church stresses this relationship. The Social Democrats I have met tend to express their religious commitments in a negative sense; i.e., they mutter about the Catholics.

Another demographic statistic involves the refugee-expellee group, a mixture of people who fled or were driven from homes in Protestant East Prussia, Catholic Sudetenland, Silesia, and the Soviet Zone. Politically, this has been an unstable group. In the first years of reconstruction, many gave their votes to the so-called Refugee Party (Gesamtdeutscher Block). In District 133, refugees and expellees number 46,000 or 21 per cent of the population. In 1953 they gave 15,000 votes to the Refugee Party, or 12 per cent of the total vote. This election after four more years of Germany's "economic miracle", the refugee vote was different, as will be seen.



Finally, a look at how District 133 voted in the national election of 1953:

Upper Hesse has had a powerful Social Democratic tradition since the end of World War I, particularly in the factory sections around Giessen. Although not to be compared with S.P.D. strongholds like Hamburg or Berlin, this state is still referred to as "Red Hesse."

Locally, the S.P.D. has maintained its standing as the most popular single party since World War II. The majority of the towns have Socialist mayors, and the district's state representatives have been mostly S.P.D. men.

However, in the 1953 election, the story was a little different. First of all, it should be explained that national elections involve two votes. One is a "direct" vote with which a single candidate is chosen. The other is a "party" vote by which a list of state party candidates is elected.

On the direct vote four years ago, the S.P.D. candidate lost to a well-known hometown boy who ran on the Free Democratic Party ticket. The constituency gave the F.D.P. man 41,460 votes as opposed to 39,033 for the Social Democrat. However, on the "party" list (Zweitstimme), the S.P.D. carried District 133 by a 5,000 vote majority.

In that 1953 election, the district's party list vote was split roughly three ways. The S.P.D. got 31 per cent, the C.D.U. got 28 per cent, and the F.D.P. got 23 per cent. In other words, there was considerable difference between the Erststimme (first or "direct" vote) and the Zweitstimme.

One year later, in the Hesse state elections, the Giessen-Alsfeld district produced a larger majority for the Social Democrats.

Since then, the district's population has increased by 1 per cent - presenting another unknown factor - more than 4,000 new voters.

Issues

The issues involved in the Erststimme election appear to be as much personal as partisan in District 133. That is, personalities and local events counted. However, in the case of the Zweitstimme, the electorate appeared to draw the lines solely on the basis of the parties, not the candidate lists. This may be explained by the fact that most of the candidates selected for the state lists were totally unfamiliar to the local electorate.

For many Giessen voters, a political affaire celebre lurked in the immediate background of the 1957 election. It started about a year ago when the city's coalition government decided to do some housecleaning. This coalition consists of S.P.D., F.D.P., and Refugee Party members. Until a year ago they were working under an Oberbürgermeister from the Christian Democratic Union, which annoyed them.

The anti-C.D.U. coalition decided to gang up on Lord Mayor Lotz and boot him out. Technically, the rules would have permitted them to do so without any particular reason. But Giessen and local passions being what they are, the coalition decided they had to have "reasons". So they accused Lotz of various shady activities (spending too much money, etc.) and then ousted him last January on grounds of "incompetence". This kicked up a lot of dust.

C.D.U. voters and many others who normally favored one or another of the coalition parties were outraged by the episode. The city government tried to explain and defend its accusations, without much success. In fact the action backfired on various coalition members - especially those from the F.D.P. As a result, many voters swore never again to vote for one of the coalition parties - be it in a local or a national election. Just how this affected the Erststimme will be seen later.

In addition to the aforementioned local issue, there were a number of national or general issues which played a role in District 133's voting. It is impossible to tell just how far these general issues went in determining both the direct and the party votes except by polling. However, the tally will show that many voters did indeed vote a "straight ticket".

The fundamental issue can be stated simply as: "Shall Germany continue its present course or should it seek new policies."

This held true for foreign policy, economic policy, social policy, and so on.

The partisan stands on these old-versus-new issues were set out in my report about the national election (DB - 15). It is safe to say that there were no local deviations from the national party platforms in District 133.

Summing up, the parties which counted themselves as conservative under the C.D.U. slogan "No Experiments", included the Deutsche Partei, the Refugee Party, and the Free Democratic Party. In fact, the F.D.P. took a step backwards and demanded that the Adenauer coalition make even less experiments along welfare state lines. This appeal was designed especially for the right wing conservatives who form the backbone of that party.

On the opposite side of the fence was the S.P.D., which called for a new foreign policy, new economic policy, and new social policy. As far as the 1957 campaign was concerned, they had this "time for a change" approach all to themselves.

One other issue played a secondary but still important role here in Giessen as well as elsewhere. This was the question of a "third party." Quite naturally, neither of the two major parties - C.D.U. and S.P.D. - were interested in promoting a third force. And just as naturally, the smaller parties like the F.D.P. and the Refugee Party, were intensely interested in pushing the idea of plurality. For the latter it was a matter of political life or death. As I pointed out in the earlier report, the 1957 election dealt some strong blows to the third party idea. However, they were by no means mortal.

In any case, all of the smaller parties strove to expound the beauties of being the Zunglein an der Waage (the tongue on the balance) in the new administration. The major contenders let loose a few scornful blasts at the idea.

Here in District 133, the two-party versus three-party theorems went through an odd transformation. It started last July, the time when the various party executives were selecting the candidates to stand in the various districts. (Residence in the district, just as in England, is not necessary for candidature). The executives try to place their most valuable men in safe districts, their best vote-getters in questionable districts, and sure losers in the hopeless districts. District 133 caused no trouble except with the C.D.U. and its faithful servant, the Deutsche Partei. And this brings us to the:

Candidates

Originally scheduled to stand for the C.D.U. in this District was a mastiff-voiced Lutheran preacher named Wilhelm Gontrum. He was carried in to the Bundestag in the 1953 election because the party had reserved a good spot for him on the Zweitstimme list. He had lost on the Erststimme. This year Gontrum pleaded for a chance to run in his native district, Number 133; his home town is a few miles south of Giessen. The party executive consented - in July. A month later, the C.D.U. withdrew the square headed minister from the local contest and placed him in another district.

The reason for this somewhat embarrassing change was a portly little farrow-faced lawyer named Ludwig Schneider.

Herr Schneider is a man of parties; three to be exact. Until last year he was associated only with the Free Democratic Party. Under its banner he won elections to the Bundestag from District 133 in 1949 and 1953. Shortly after the last election, he was chosen by his fellow deputies to be vice-president of the second Bundestag.

Until a year ago, Ludwig Schneider's reputation was flourishing in Giessen and Bonn. However, the F.D.P. was experiencing shrinking pains. Following a series of bitter quarrels with Chancellor Adenauer and his Christian Democrat colleagues, the F.D.P. marched out of the great right-wing coalition, led by the party chief Reinhold Maier. Like Napoleon on the way back from Moscow, Herr Maier left a number of men behind. Among them was Ludwig Schneider, who had tasted the sweet security of partnership with Adenauer and an office in Bonn. He became one of the 85 Bonn mavericks to change parties between 1953 and 1957.

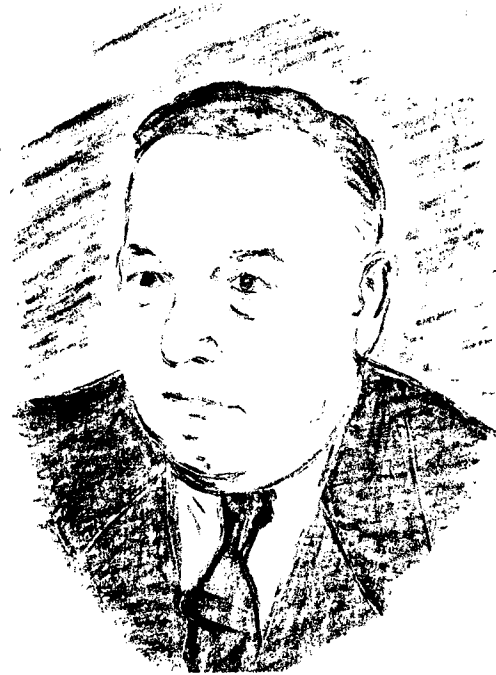
Schneider and some like-minded F.D.P. men then founded the F.V.P. (Frei Volkspartei). It was a midget when compared to most of West Germany's dozen political parties. Many of its members were simply personal followers of the F.V.P. bigshots. With less than 12 months to go to the national election, the mavericks decided they must herd together with a larger party. They picked the Deutsche Partei, a group of conservatives concentrated largely in North Germany. These two splinter parties of Adenauer loyalists managed to glue themselves together just in time for the September election. Ludwig Schneider entered the local race this time as the candidate of the "D.P. - F.V.P."

That was the quandary - Schneider and Pastor Gontrum, both abiding Adenauer men, would be running against each other in the same district. With a glance at the 1953 election statistics, it's easy to see that both candidates got the heebie-jeebies. Obviously, the F.D.P. would still pull some weight in Giessen. Obviously, the S.P.D. wasn't going to lose too much strength. Obviously, a C.D.U. candidate and a "D.P. - F.V.P." candidate would only be knocking each other out. A compromise had to be reached.

The solution as worked out in joint meetings of the party executives was that Pastor Gontrum should withdraw from candidacy in District 133. His reward was a safe place on the Zweitstimme list. Schneider was given the Erststimme field, all to himself. This left the local Christian Democrats with a tough job - getting their voters to pick Schneider on the first list and the C.D.U. on the second.

Ludwig Schneider is a 64-year-old native of North Hesse. His background was modest. He had to work to earn his studies from junior high school on to the university.

While holding down a job as a clerk in a Wetzlar factory, he finished university studies and received a doctorate in law. For many years he has made his home in the industrial town of Lollar, a few miles north of Giessen. Schneider's law practice is located here.



This roly-poly lawyer started his political career in 1948 by assuming various offices in the F.D.P. district. As a popular local figure, he had a relatively easy time running for election the next year. His selection as Bundestag vice-president made his standing in Giessen all the better (hometown boy makes good). But there were one or two signs that power had gone to Ludwig Schneider's head. For instance, last summer when he eased his big black Mercedes into a Giessen filling station.

There was another car at the pump and Schneider told the driver to "move on." The man asked why. "Don't you know who I am?" said the politico. "You're talking to the vice-president of the Bundestag." The man got into his car and made

way for Herr Schneider. Things like that and his sudden switch of parties caused him to lose some local support - some but not much.

The loss of a potent vote-getter like Dr. Schneider put the district Free Democrats in an awkward position. They were obliged to get a new candidate. At the same time they had to vindicate the F.D.P. stand nationally (in the case of Reinhold Maier's break from the coalition) and locally (in the case of the Oberbürgermeister deposal maneuver.)

The man they picked to carry the flag was Freiherr (baron) Knut von Kühlmann-Stumm, a handsome gentleman farmer. His father was Kaiser Wilhelm's last secretary of state, the man who signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty for Germany. His mother, Marguerite von Stumm, was the daughter of a famous Saarland industrialist whose chief political reknown stems from the time he gave financial support to anti-semitic candidates in the 1890's.

Young Knut, aged 41, is politically clean. He was educated in private schools, studied to be a banker, and entered the Wehrmacht as an officer in 1936.

He served with Panzer corps on the major battlefronts, and was commissioned to the Generalstab in 1943. After a brief term as a prisoner of war, he took up farming on the family grange at Ramholz, 35 miles east of here. Since 1945 he has busied himself with farming and forestry, a wife and three children. Until this year, he had not been heard of in politics.

The foregoing biographical details would not be worth mentioning except that Baron von K hlmann himself emphasized his familial, agricultural, and military connections throughout the campaign. He also dressed the part - wearing riding boots, flared pants, and a boxbacked country squire's jacket at most election rallies.

The third candidate for the Bundestag from District 133 was Gotthard Franke of the Refugee Party, (otherwise known as the "All-German Block League of Expellees and Dispossessed" - GB/BHE). Franke, aged 45, is a native of Sudetenland. He worked in various industrial concerns as a young man and then took a city administration post in a small town. After World War II, he and several million other Sude-ten Germans were thrown out of Czechoslovakia. Franke came to Giessen and got into county and state politics. This pleasant-faced man with the large flapping ears was elected to the Hesse legislature in 1950. Three years ago, he was elected to the Giessen City Council. And in 1955 he was named Minister of Work, Economics, and Traffic for Hesse. Meanwhile, he has held numerous party posts on the local and state levels. Franke, more than any of his opponents, is a professional politician.

A fourth party played a very minor role in the District 133 election - perhaps fortunately so. This was the Deutsche Reichs Partei, the largest of the extreme rightist parties in the Bundesrepublik. Most of its support has been drawn from unreformed National Socialist elements in Lower Saxony. Here in Giessen, the D.R.P. has never been a power. But it did put up a candidate, Richard Cost. He is a 46-year-old Upper Hesse farmer with a background rich in Nazi associations and offices.

Herr Cost's political ambitions and program, like that of his party, are somewhat unclear. The main D.R.P. proposals are: an amnesty for Nazi war criminals and reinstatement of full civil privileges for Germans convicted of political crimes. Just how successful such appeals were in Giessen will be seen shortly. If this wolf-eyed farmer's piddling campaign was typical, then the new Germany need have nothing to fear from right wing radicals.

The fifth candidate in District 133 was the Social Democratic Party's Hans Merten, a 49-year-old Lutheran minister. He is the son of a Wiesbaden grade school teacher, a husky man with a big head and snapping brown eyes. When he's not talking, Merten sometimes has the bland look of a beaver who has just gnawed down a tree.



Pastor Merten got interested in politics during the late Twenties while he was studying theology at Marburg and Berlin. Although active in several student political groups, he never joined the S.D.D. - not until after the war. Merten worked as a minister in various parts of Germany from 1933 until he was drafted in 1939. As an artillery observer, he saw much service in France and Russia. In late 1944, he was caught in a Russian pincers movement that soon left him hundreds of miles behind the front. Merten and a couple of other Wehrmacht men trekked all the way back to Germany and through the front lines - 600 miles.

After the war, Merten was appointed head of the Lutheran Church's prisoner of war section for Hesse. He was a P.O.W. camp chaplain at the same time.

In 1949, he was appointed head of the Bonn Government's committee for war prisoners and refugees. And about that time, he got active in politics again, this time as a member of the S.P.D.

In a 1951 Hessian by-election, Merten was chosen as Bundestag deputy from the Waldeck District in the northern part of the state. Two years later, in the national election, Merten carried the same district with a healthy majority. His Erststimme vote was 2,000 ahead of the Zweitstimme total for the S.P.D.

Since 1953, Merten has devoted little time to the ministry. He has been busy with Bundestag committee assignments - especially those on defense and refugees. He also holds a job as president of the Heimkehrerverband (Returning prisoner association).

A few weeks before the September 15 election, Hans Merten paused to consider his chances. He sized up District 133, which was unfamiliar to him. He was running against a well-known local man (Ludwig Schneider), the Catholic Church (which had come out for the C.D.U.), the Free Democrats (who paraded their anti-socialist sentiments), the Farmer's Association (a strong interest group which came out for the C.D.U.), local industrialists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and many many old women.

Said Merten to his tall, good-looking wife: "I've got a fifty-fifty chance." Few politicians have ever made a more accurate estimate.

David Binder
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