

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 19  
Hairbreadth Hans:  
Election, Part III

Plockstrasse 8  
Giessen, Germany  
December 14, 1957

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Remembering Hans Merten's prophecy of a "fifty-fifty" outcome in the District 133 election, I decided to get a couple of other election predictions the day before the balloting.

Herman Stein, a F.D.P. leader, had a gloomy outlook. He said the Social Democrat, Merten, would win on the Erststimme. On the Zweitstimme, Stein continued, the Christian Democrats would show substantial gains. "We Free Democrats ought to get about 15 per cent on the second list," he said.

At D.P. - F.V.P. headquarters, the man in charge was Ludwig Suth, a civil engineer. He predicted that his "old friend" Schneider would win on the Erststimme - mainly with the help of the up-country farm vote. Suth added that the voting turnout would be 90 per cent.

At S.P.D. headquarters, skinny little Heinie Beese was running the show. He had emerged from a Soviet Zone political prison only a short while before. Said Beese, "Merten will win. And we'll gain on the Zweitstimme."

There's an old W.C. Fields story about the time he was refused a drink at the Happy Buzzard Saloon, because it was Election Day. The bartender said: "That's the law." Fields asked, "Who made this law?" The reply was, "the people." Said Fields, "that's carrying democracy too far."

A buzzard could have enjoyed a nip on Election Day in Germany; the bars were all open on September 15. Moreover, 90 per cent of the German voters did put their ballots in the urns. In America, where the taverns close on election day, we do well to get a 60 per cent turnout at the polls. Of course this might be just coincidence.

It was a quiet Sunday, and the voters appeared to be dressed for church - whether they went or not. The polling stations were set up in schools, banks, and a few office buildings. Outside, the different parties had their posters up.

The polls were run by city employees. I asked whether anyone ever suspected them of corrupt practices. "Never," said several. "the German civil servant prides himself on honesty." I believed it.

In fact the atmosphere which prevailed in Giessen's polling stations seemed remarkably calm when compared to that in America.



Sunday voting in a bank

After that, he put it in a cardboard ballotbox... a perfect set-up for ballot-box stuffing.

A German proverb goes: Wer Die Wahl hat, hat die Qual (He who has the vote or choice, has the torment). It applied to many Giessen voters last September. One could see them bending over their ballots, scratching their heads, minds still not made up. Some stayed as long as 10 minutes at the booths.

#### Tally

By noon, a third of the vote was in. And by 6 p.m., when the polls closed, 90 per cent of the registered voters in District 133 has exercised the right of suffrage. The tallying started immediately.



Into the ballot-box

Furthermore, there was an open innocence about the voting machinery which was astonishing. Voting booths were not curtained off, and it would have been easy to see how a voter marked his ballot.

As each voter entered the polls, he showed his voting-registration card. A poll worker handed him an envelope and a ballot. He went to the pasteboard booth, marked it, and sealed it in the envelope. Then he showed the envelope to a checker, who crossed his name off the registration list.

Around the corner, in polling station 11, the counting was done this way: The election board chairman sent out for a dozen bottles of beer and a plate of sandwiches. Then he read the federal protocol on counting procedure. He and his seven assistants anxiously counted the envelopes and checked the total against the registration lists. The chairman sighed with relief, "thank god it tallies - let's all have a drink."

After that the assistants began opening the ballots and handing them to the chairman. The marks on each ballot were read aloud - 1,700 of them. The full tally took two hours. Then there was a recount. The results were sent to city hall.

While attending the counting I could spot several interesting trends. Almost all of the S.P.D. ballots had straight-ticket votes, whereas the voters who picked the D.P. - F.V.P. on the first list usually marked the C.D.U. column on the second list. Also, there was a fair percentage of voters who left the first list blank and simply marked the C.D.U. box on the second.

In the meantime the results were beginning to come in at city hall election headquarters, first from the Giessen stations and later from the country areas. Managing the headquarters was Giessen's ebullient little mayor, Alfred Osswald.

Ludwig Schneider took an early lead in the Erststimme race. When Giessen results came in, he soon obtained a 2,000 vote jump on Hans Merten. Mayor Osswald, a stalwart S.P.D. man, looked miserable each time he entered the press room with a new tally sheet.

Then at 10 p.m. the reports from Giessen County came in - giving Merten a 5,000 vote majority. Schneider was still leading by 1,800 in the city, but Osswald and the other S.P.D. supporters wore smiles for the first time all evening.

A few minutes later, Alsfeld County reported - 12,800 for Schneider and 10,262 for Merten. The S.P.D. faces clouded a bit. At 11 p.m., Merten was leading overall by barely 1,000 votes. Five polling stations in the city of Giessen still hadn't reported.

During the next 45 minutes Merten's lead dwindled as each new report arrived. At a quarter to 12, the last two reports arrived - each with temporary estimates. Schneider suddenly took the lead with 32 votes. Mayor Osswald and his entourage let forth a long moan. "Thirty-two, thirty-two, painful, painful," Osswald kept repeating.

"It's not over yet," a hopeful cried. He was answered with nervous laughter. Osswald and his aides bent over the tally sheets and combed the columns for errors. They found some. In the following half hour, the lead changed between Merten and Schneider five more times. Then the final reports came in from the last two questionable stations. They gave Social Democrat Hans Merten a hairsbreadth margin of 88 votes. His "fifty-fifty" forecast was accurate.

"Eighty-eighty," shouted Mayor Osswald, and danced a victory jig. He clapped a beret on his head and rushed over to S.P.D. headquarters to congratulate Hans Merten. The victor was bathed in sweat. "Sic transit Schneider," said a party worker.

We stayed up to listen to the radio broadcasts from federal election headquarters in Bonn. Adenauer and his friends were rolling on to a decisive victory at the expense of the Free Democrats and other splinter parties.

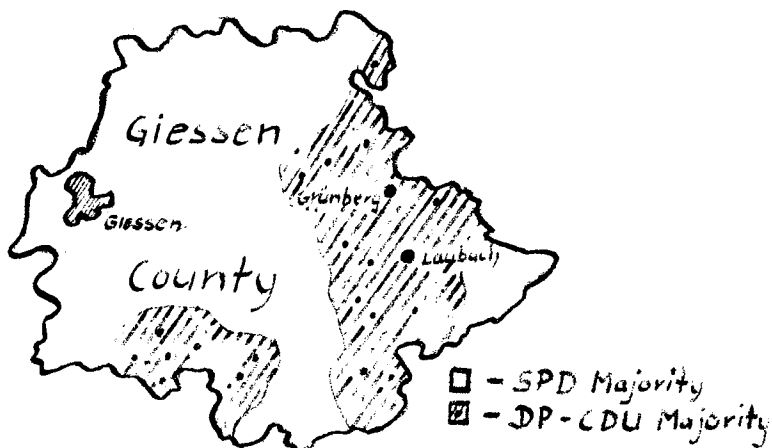
The S.P.D. was making minute gains over its 1953 stand. Merten's victory was never announced. It came in too late.

### Post Mortem

There was no cause for unconfined joy by any of the parties in District 133, except the C.D.U. Every other party took some sort of licking. Following is a tally, party by party, of how the vote went here.

	Direct Vote ( <u>Erststimme</u> )		Party Vote ( <u>Zweitstimme</u> )	
	1953	1957	1953	1957
SPD	39,032 (31%)	47,049 (35%)	38,250 (31%)	44,266 (33%)
CDU			33,598 (28%)	48,249 (36%)
DP/FVP	1,866 ( 1%)	46,961 (35%)	1,899 ( 1%)	11,298 ( 8%)
FDP	41,460 (33%)	12,278 ( 9%)	28,070 (23%)	11,055 ( 8%)
GB/BHE	21,941 (17%)	13,657 (10%)	15,044 (12%)	10,891 ( 8%)

As can be seen from this tabulation, Hans Merten's direct vote total was 3,000 larger than that of his party on the Zweitstimme. On the party vote, the C.D.U. gained a clear majority with more than 48,000 votes. Of course the S.P.D. did show improvement over its 1953 standing - a rise of 4 per cent on the Erststimme, and 2 per cent on the Zweitstimme. However, on that second vote, the C.D.U. made a phenomenal gain of 8 per cent over its 1953 standing.



The map shows: Industrial belt (white) goes Socialist. Rest stays conservative.

Meanwhile, the personal pulling power of Ludwig Schneider is demonstrated by the amazing lift he gave the D.P. - F.V.P. - from 1 per cent of the vote in 1953 to 35 per cent this year. Also, the D.P. - F.V.P. obviously benefited on the Zweitstimme. The party gained nearly 10,000 votes over its 1953 number. This can be explained partly by the effect of the Oberbürgermeister ouster, which offended so many Giessen voters.

The F.D.P. suffered grievous losses in District 133 as well as in the nation at large. The tabulation shows that Baron von Kuhlmann's total was 22 per cent less than the Erststimme vote for the F.D.P. in 1953. On the party vote, the F.D.P. got 15 per cent less than four years ago. Indeed, most of the S.P.D. and C.D.U. gains must be reckoned as losses for the Free Democrats.

Finally, the Refugee Party (GB - BHE) experienced heavy losses in comparison with its 1953 totals - 7 per cent less on the direct vote and 4 per cent less on the party vote. That was part of a general trend in the Bundesrepublik; it showed that many "refugees" had been assimilated by the large parties.

As a result of the 1957 election in this district, only the S.P.D.'s Merten was able to join the new Bundestag. Baron Kühmann was too far back on the Hesse party list to get a place. And such was also the case with Ludwig Schneider, who was forced to resume his local law practice.

The F.D.P.'s Hermann Stein had called most of these shots in his pre-election forecast.

After the election, I asked some acquaintances how they had voted and why. Their answers provided an interesting cross-section of District 133's voting.

Reimund Domogalla and his wife (DB - 2), both devout Catholics and sensitive to the church's views on the S.P.D., voted this way: Erststimme blank and Zweitstimme for the C.D.U. They explained, "We didn't like Schneider and there was no one else to vote for."

Professor Wolf Ankel, the new Rektor of Giessen University, (DB - 13), voted Social Democratic across the board. So did the young teacher, Erwin Lich (DB - 2), the bosomy woman who sells me newspapers, my barber, and Dr. Siebel (DB - 4) of the Hilfsschule.

Several students who are members of student duelling fraternities (necessarily Protestant) said they had voted for the D.P. - F.V.P. on both lists. Why? "So as to get more Protestants into the Adenauer coalition."

Other Protestants, like Pastor Trommershausen (DB - 7) split their tickets for Schneider on the first vote and the C.D.U. on the second. Voting like this minister was Rektor Frank of the Schillerschule (DB - 2). Similarly, many Catholics split their ballots this way; among them the teacher, Nikolaus Weidenbörner and School Superintendent Adam Scheurer (DB - 2).

A few middle class voters like Therese Kalbfleisch (DB - 4) stayed with the F.D.P. all the way.

Finally, there were my friends from the Stammtisch (the table in the tavern "at the Sun" reserved for a group of beer drinkers every Friday night). Erich Decker (DB - 3) and his comrade Hermann Dinges, both chose the radical right-wing Deutsche Reichs Partei. Their reasons were these:

"What was there to do? we can't stand the Catholics in the C.D.U. We think Schneider is a traitor to the F.D.P. (DB - 16). The Free Democrats stink after what they did to the Lord Mayor. And we can't vote for the Socialists. There's no other choice but the D.R.P."

One further reaction is necessary to round off this sampling. It's from a teacher who said, "Ten years ago I didn't have a house and I didn't have a car..."

Now I have a house and next year I'll have a car. Naturally, I voted for the party (C.D.U.) that brought this.

The political future of District 133 was by no means defined in this election. It was clear that the S.P.D. had been able to hold on to its regular voters and even add to that hard core. It was quite plain that the C.D.U. is stronger than ever here. In a stand-off between the two, the S.P.D. would surely lose.

Despite the heavy setbacks experienced by the Free Democrats, it is still too early to count them out of the race. And as long as they are around, the Social Democrats will have a chance to split the right wing down the middle. As for Ludwig Schneider and his ill-fated D.P. - F.V.P., it seems likely that he and his supporters will migrate to one or another of the great parties.

In the months following the election, Schneider's party colleagues registered all sorts of complaints with the election commission. One result was an immediate recount under the supervision of Mayor Osswald. This recount gave Hans Merten 92 votes majority - four more than the original number.

Among the complaints was one that accused the S.P.D. of "unlawfully influencing" voters. This brought on a special investigation which resulted in nothing. At this writing, a federal examining committee is still rummaging among the District 133 tally sheets in search of errors. But it seems very unlikely that any major changes will occur.

This is also conceded by Giessen's best-known lawyer, a man who was once called "Bundesludwig" or "Federal Lou's". He is now called just plain Ludwig Schneider.

*David Binder*  
David Binder