

Germany's Left Party is shut out of government, but remains a powerful player in German politics

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*The Left Party (Die Linke) received 11.9 per cent of the vote in the 2009 German federal elections, and is predicted to comfortably clear the country's 5 per cent threshold in this Sunday's vote. **Jonathan Olsen** outlines the party's recent history and its role in the German party system. He notes that although the Left Party appears willing to enter into coalition with the other major parties, it is not viewed as a viable coalition partner. Despite being shut out of government, the party nevertheless remains an important part of German politics.*



Although the government that emerges after Germany's federal elections on 22 September will largely depend on the performance of the two biggest parties, the conservative block of CDU/CSU and the Left-Center Social Democrats (SPD), the impact of smaller parties on the ultimate outcome should not be underestimated.

Thus the failure of the Free Democrats (FDP) to clear the 5 per cent hurdle necessary for legislative representation would most likely lead to a "Grand Coalition" of CDU/CSU and SPD, while an outstanding performance by the German Greens could make possible (though unlikely) an SPD-Greens coalition government. The third of Germany's smaller parties – the Left Party – will not have the same impact on coalition calculations as the FDP and Greens, since all of the other four parties have categorically ruled out a coalition with it. Nevertheless, the Left Party's performance in the upcoming election should continue to underscore its pivotal place in the German political system

In the 2009 federal election the party garnered a stunning 11.9 per cent of the vote, an increase of some 3 per cent over its already impressive electoral result in 2005. It continues to have a strong presence in eastern Germany, where it is the third-largest political party (and in some states, 2nd largest). Meanwhile, the party has continued to make electoral inroads (albeit modest) into the west, and is now represented in several state parliaments there. How did the Left Party emerge and what explains its success? What is its strategy going into the 2013 election and what are its future political prospects?

From PDS to Left Party

The emergence of the Left Party as a stable political force is one of the most surprising developments in post-unification German politics. In the first several years after unification the Left Party/PDS – the successor to the old ruling East German communist party (SED) – was dismissed as an ephemeral political phenomenon. Yet having gained entrance to the *Bundestag* in 1990 only by virtue of a special relaxation of electoral requirements in this first



Die Linke campaign poster, Credit: Jim Killock (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

all-German election, in 1994 the party surprisingly won 4 electoral district seats outright (guaranteeing it representation under a clause in the electoral law) and increased its share of the vote to 4.4 per cent, bettering this in 1998 with 5.1 per cent.

Just as surprising to many, in regional elections throughout eastern Germany in the 1990s the PDS performed remarkably, gaining up to a fifth of the vote. Acting as a support party in Saxony-Anhalt in 1994, and then as a junior coalition partner to the SPD in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in 1998, it was also able to gain valuable governing experience and political credibility. Still, the party was frustrated in its attempt to build any organisation in western Germany, and it remained on the electoral fringes there.

Analysts studying the party at this time were divided over how to characterise it, with some seeing it as a classic protest party, others as “the party of unification losers”, and still others as the representative of a distinctive socialist “milieu” that persisted in the east. While each of these perspectives had some degree of truth to them, they all had difficulties in explaining the stable and cross-cutting voter support for the party, on the one hand, and its increasing share of the vote, on the other. Perhaps the most cogent analyses of the party suggested that the PDS had come to be something of an eastern German *Volkspartei* or a mass party representing specific eastern German interests and identity. Indeed, the party staked out positions as a vigorous defender of the welfare state (suspicious, if not hostile to capitalism), and for a non-aligned, pacifist foreign policy attractive to eastern Germans.

In the 2002 federal elections, however, the party failed to clear the 5 per cent hurdle and was only able to win two district seats outright. Infighting between moderates and radicals (always a feature of the PDS) reached new heights and a lack of leadership seemed to indicate that the party would remain in an eastern regionalist trough. But tough reforms and budget cuts made by then-SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder ignited widespread protests and a split in the SPD. A new party in western Germany emerged – the WASG – and attempted to fill the new vacuum on the left. Spurred on by former SPD heavyweight Oskar Lafontaine for the WASG and the dominant force in the PDS, Gregory Gysi, the two parties merged into a new party, the Left Party. The Left Party gained a new dynamism as an all-German party of the radical left.

2013 and Beyond: Current and Future Prospects for the Left Party

Although the Left Party has been able to expand into western Germany and increase its share of the vote considerably since 2002, the problems that have plagued the party continue to exist in one degree or another. These include above all a struggle over the ideological direction of the party, cultural conflicts between the eastern and western party organisations, and the difficulty of replacing the older generation of charismatic leaders such as Gysi and the late Lothar Bisky.

To be sure, its self-conception as the party of “social justice” continues to play well among a significant portion of the electorate and current polls put the party at between 8-10 per cent of the vote. In addition to its continued opposition to NATO and any military engagement for Germany (with or without UN sanction), its election manifesto calls for a minimum wage of 10 euros an hour, a French-like tax on millionaires, a rollback of the Schroeder-era labour-market reforms, and opposition to the austerity policies towards EU member states championed by Angela Merkel. It thus remains unattractive as a coalition partner, despite declarations by current party leaders Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger that the party is open to this. Indeed, the only possibility for the Left Party to join a coalition government in the future will be if it is able to moderate its foreign policy positions and extravagant economic demands.

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