

Against the odds: The improbable journey of Die Linke through unified Germany

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Opinion polls suggest that as many as six independent parties could cross the electoral threshold and enter the Bundestag in Germany's federal elections in September. In advance of the elections, we will be running a series profiling each of these parties. In the first article of the series, [Ross Campbell](#) writes on the German Left Party (*Die Linke*), which has confounded initial expectations after the unification of Germany to become a stable feature of the German party system. However, with the rise of new challengers, the 2017 elections could pose formidable challenges for the party as it seeks to build on the third place it achieved in the last federal elections in 2013.



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Elections dramatise politics; and the ebbs and flows of support for the German Left Party (*Die Linke*) have been a plentiful source of drama. The party's remarkable journey through unified Germany has confounded its critics and exceeded its own expectations.

Its development can be neatly summarised as follows. In the aftermath of unification in 1990, the balance of academic commentary suggested it was finished: it was the successor to the former communist party of East Germany, with tarnished origins in an undemocratic state, a tainted leadership, a membership in free-fall and an electoral strategy foredoomed to failure. Its extinction seemed inevitable. And yet at the 2013 election, it returned to parliament as the third largest party, which confirmed its transition from a regionally-based protest outlet into a stable actor at the national level. How has it achieved this? And what are the implications for the wider texture of German party politics?

Of crucial importance is the context in which elections occur. The erosion of the traditional cleavages in society has increased the number of unattached voters in an environment in which there is hardened discontent with the established parties. As a consequence, the combined share of the vote for Germany's main parties (CDU/CSU and

SPD) has dropped from 87 percent in 1983 to 67 percent in 2013, a decline of 20 percentage points in thirty years. As votes are more widely dispersed, so the main parties are finding it increasingly difficult to win in a manner that enables them to form a government with their preferred coalition partners.

Two of the last three federal elections have resulted in grand coalitions, and current projections suggest that as many as six parties could enter parliament after the next election in September – an eventuality for which there is no precedent in the history of the post-war Federal Republic. As elections have become more inconclusive and volatile, voters' support for smaller parties may ensure that the arithmetic is such that grand coalitions are a more frequent occurrence – or some of the smaller parties may be needed to sustain coalitions. In the light of long-term changes in electoral behaviour, smaller parties have an added profile and significance in the party system.

No discussion of the Left Party could neglect how the unique circumstances of German unification have contributed to its survival. The difficulties surrounding the transition created an abundance of political capital with which it could package its message. It initially campaigned as the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), and early analyses sourced its support to easterners on the left, who were frustrated at the style and content of contemporary political decision-making, and who remained sensitive to politically-motivated expectations that unification would be a democratic and equal fusion.

In addition, the party's support was grounded in perceptions of the socio-economic environment. By channelling the backlash from those who had lost out through modernisation and those who were nostalgic for aspects of the pre-1989 era, the party established a reputation as a sympathetic defender of the East. This message resonated with one fifth of the eastern electorate at the federal elections in 1994 and 1998.

Yet it remained vulnerable. Despite its strength in the East, it was a formidable challenge to achieve representation in parliament on a consistent basis. And at the 2002 election it crashed out of parliament and descended into sectarian infighting from which few expected it would emerge unscathed. An unexpected lifeline came, however, from the Red-Green government (1998-2005). Against a backdrop of sluggish growth and increasing debt, the government undertook a far-reaching programme of welfare retrenchment.

The proposals were anathema to the base of the SPD, and a protest movement was set up by disgruntled trade unionists and former SPD chancellor candidate, Oskar Lafontaine. An electoral alliance followed with the PDS at the 2005 federal election, and there were immediate gains. The two entities merged in 2007, and at the 2009 election, it cut into the traditional SPD vote in the West more heavily and swept into parliament with its largest share of the vote at a federal election (11.9%) and its highest number of deputies (76).

An analysis of its support at the 2013 federal elections reveals three important points about the party's voters. First, it struggled to attract support from economically pessimistic voters. Despite the election occurring amidst the fallout of a global financial crisis, it is doubtful whether its critique of capitalism resonated with voters in ways that brought it additional electoral support. As the late chair of the party, Lothar Bisky, once [noted](#), however: 'nobody votes for you just because you've known things from the start.' But this point notwithstanding, if the party failed to politicise the crisis in ways that were to its electoral advantage it may be sobering reading for radical left parties.

Second, the party's support remains steeped in the East. Although the eastern state from which it takes its origins has long since passed into history – and there have been significant revisions to its ideology, programme and leadership – it nevertheless continues to attract votes from disaffected easterners who are nostalgic for aspects of divided Germany. Discovering these points in the early to mid-1990s would hardly have constituted a revelation. But the persistence of them – and the way they have remained stable following organisational change – is an important testament to their durability.

Third, voters attracted to the party in the West differ in interesting ways from those in the East. Rather than being supported by the politically disaffected, its western support stems from concerns about reductions in the size and scope of the welfare state – it is largely output-focused. And it is more limited and brittle in nature: it derives from

fewer factors which are circumscribed by issues of social protection. If these issues are of reduced salience in the forthcoming elections, and the party fails to diversify its support, it may well suffer losses.

This is where the party begins its campaign for the 2017 federal election. European policy, security and immigration seem likely to eclipse the welfare state as voter priorities. True, the party had a decent performance in the Berlin election in September 2016, increasing its share of the vote and its total number of seats. But losses in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in the same month were a bitter disappointment. And with the CDU [performing better than expected](#) in state elections in Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia, and with the AfD gaining ground in the East, there is a formidable task ahead for the Left Party. Perhaps the best it can expect is to retain its existing levels of support.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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