

Germany, Brexit and the Future of the European Union

Charles Lees and Philip Walters 20 July 2017

Politics and Society in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany comprises the eleven states of the former West Germany and the five states of the former East Germany. Its political system has two important features: parliamentary federalism and mixed-member proportional representation (MMP). A federal parliamentary republic is a federation of states with a government that is more or less dependent on the confidence of parliaments at both the national and subnational levels. MMP is a mixed electoral system in which voters have two votes: one to decide the representative for their single-seat constituency, and one for a political party's 'list' of candidates. Seats in the legislature are filled firstly by the successful constituency candidates, and secondly by party candidates on the basis of the percentage of nationwide votes that each party receives. MMP differs from parallel voting in that the nationwide seats are allocated to political parties in a compensatory manner in order to achieve proportional election results. Under MMP, two parties that each receive 25% of the votes may both end up with 25% of the seats, even if one party wins more constituencies than the other.

The political system that developed in Germany after the Second World War was a three-party central-tending triangular dynamic involving the CDU/CSU, the SPD and the FDP, which were been more or less equal in political influence if not seats. This political system was somewhat upset after 1983 when the Greens became significant, and in 1990 with the emergence of the left-leaning PDS (the direct successor to the East German SED and later to become the Left Party) after the reincorporation of the GDR. Over the last 20 years Germany has become much more of a cosmopolitan and multicultural society. The 2011 census gave the population of Germany as 80.2 million. About 74 million (92.3%) were German citizens, of whom 9.9 million (12.3%) were of immigrant background. About 6 million (7.7%) were foreign nationals. The figures for religious belief were: none 33.5%; Roman Catholic 29.5%; Protestant 27.9%; Muslim 5%; other Christian 3.3%; other religion 0.8%. Social cleavages persist to differing degrees in Germany along ethnic, confessional, class and geographical lines, accompanied by a cultural divide between citizens with libertarian or authoritarian value orientations. Nevertheless the German political culture is still basically consensual, as opposed to the UK's adversarial political culture. A stable party system, a relatively consensual parliamentary culture, coalition government and multi-level governance, in the context of a social market economy, make up what has been called Germany's 'efficient secret' (Smith 1994).

German attitudes to Brexit

The Germans don't really understand the British, but there is residual Anglophilia, and they quite like us, and would prefer us to be in the EU rather than out of it. The German political system tends to skew the German perception of how politics works in the UK, and therefore of how Brexit could be possible. As noted above, UK politics is adversarial, and arguably this leads to the possibility of what the Germans would regard as adventurism, as seen in the situation since the 2016 referendum. Indeed, referenda

themselves are alien to the German political system as it has developed since the Second World War. The UK referendum result was not welcomed in Germany: 17% for, 74% against, 9% don't know. The response was quite political. Supporters of the various parties voted as follows (for-against). FDP: 20% - 77%; CDU/CSU: 10% - 87%; SPD: 8% - 84%; Left Party: 25% - 60%; non-voters: 22% - 56%; AfD: 63% - 29%. The economic links between the UK and Germany are asymmetrical. German exports to the UK were worth 86 billion euros to Germany in 2016; and 750,000 German jobs are linked to the UK market, especially in the car industry where 2500 German companies have invested 120 billion euros in the UK. Those promoting the Leave cause in the UK assume that Germany would be keen to preserve these economic links. However, this assumption is based on the premise that economics trumps politics. A recent German word to describe the UK's attitude to the EU is *Extrawurstdenken*: 'thinking in terms of getting the extra sausage'. In fact, Germany views the integrity of the single market to be more important than trade links with any single (former) member-state; for Germany, politics is more important than economics, and it views the political integration of Europe as more important than economic ties with particular countries.

The Future of the EU

Brexit would be a mixed blessing for Germany. It would boost the status of Germany as the most powerful EU member state; but it would undermine the EU consensus around rules-based, economic liberalism, and shift power away from the North towards the South. The departure of the UK would mean a potential re-booting of the Franco-German motor, but with the Germans very much in charge. France would make up for this with greater international leverage: after Brexit, France would be likely to become the main broker between the EU and the USA. The Brexit vote must be seen as a wake-up call for the EU. Its short-term impact in Germany has been to boost pro-European sentiment, but this will change over time. Immigration and austerity drive rapid social change, producing a powerful mix that threatens democratic order. The success of the right wing populist 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) - with 12.6% of the vote in this September's Federal election - is evidence of this. The AfD's emergence in the Federal Republic's previously consensual political system shocked Germany's political class and reverberated across Europe, where there are growing confrontations between globalisation and economic nationalism, compounding existing issues of defence and security. In this context, the Monnet method's slow incremental increase of political integration in Europe without explicit discussion seems no longer fit for purpose. The democratic deficit needs to be closed: but does this mean more or less Europe?

Reference

Smith, G. (1981) 'Does West German democracy have an efficient secret?', in W.E. Paterson and G. Smith (eds), *The West German Model: Perspectives on a Stable State* (London, Frank Cass).

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