

Political Parties, Membership Mobilisation and Power Management -

The Example of the Federal Republic of Germany*

by Gerd Mielke

1. PARTIES IN A COMPETITIVE SYSTEM

Parties and their members have been a hot issue in Germany for at least two or three decades now, and criticisms of German parties and their role as instruments of political representation and fields of political participation has grown steadily. These criticisms are not merely an academic enterprise restricted to the elusive community of party researchers in their ivory towers. They are also – some would say: above all – a matter of public and political concern, because the parties are the backbones of German politics. Political life – that is, the activities of individual citizens and social groups, as well as the policy programs and proceedings of the government on all levels of decision-making in the Federal Republic – has always been centred around political parties. Their vital role in the political process is even laid down in the »Basic Law«, the German constitution.

Many empirical studies in recent years indicate that political parties have been finding it more difficult to bring citizens and voters into the political process and to create strong and lasting feelings of political identification and political trust among their supporters than thirty or forty years ago. In addition, the German parties no longer seem to be particularly attractive organisations of political participation for their members. Two indicators

clearly reflect this representation and participation crisis: a steady decline in the turnout in all kinds of elections and a steady decline in party membership.

In order to better understand this diagnosis and the discussion of possible solutions it would be helpful to examine a few basic features of German parties, their political functions and their historical background.

1.1. The Electoral System and the Consequences for Parliamentary Representation

German political parties operate within a competitive party system: that is, the parties compete for the votes of the electorate in federal and state elections. These elections take place every four years at the national level and every five years at the state level. In Germany, federal and state elections are run in accordance with proportional representation. Under the rules of this electoral system the parties' shares of votes are transformed into proportional shares of parliamentary mandates. How-

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* This paper was presented at the international workshop "Political Parties – Between Disenchantment of Citizens with Politics and Mobilisation for Political Participation", Shanghai, Jun. 11, 2010, organised jointly by the Shanghai Administration Institute and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

ever, a single party has to get at least five per cent of the votes in order to be admitted to parliament. Those parties who fail to reach the 5 per cent barrier are not represented. Elections bestow political legitimacy, and it is on the basis of electoral votes that parliamentary majorities and minorities are constituted. In most elections no single party holds a parliamentary majority on its own, so coalitions of two or more parties usually have to be negotiated in order come up with a stable and working government. At present, out of a total of 16 Federal states, only one has a single-party government: in all the others, as well as at the national level, there are coalition governments consisting of two or more parties.

1.2 Cleavage Structures in Germany

If you take a closer look at the German party system you will find that it is fairly similar to many other European party systems. All European party systems are rooted in a common structure of deep social, cultural and economic cleavages dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was transformed into parties and party systems. Most of these cleavages are still visible today, even though they may have changed shape and proportions. Some new cleavages, such as the conflict between environmentalists and their opponents in the 1970s, have led to the foundation of new, so-called Green parties in quite a few European countries. In some countries with a first-past-the-post electoral system, such as the UK, however, you find many environmentalist groups and voters but no Green parties worth mentioning. This is the political consequence of electoral law which seeks so-called »manufactured majorities«, and deliberately distorting proportional representation in favour of clear majorities for the sake of strong and stable government.

In Germany, we find *four traditional cleavages* represented in the party system. The most important cleavage is the one that has traditionally confronted capitalists and workers. In recent decades this cleavage has been transformed into a cleavage between social groups which support the idea of a strong welfare state and groups with a strong market orientation in the liberal tradition which also criticise welfare. We also have the cleavage between religious and secularized groups in society. This cleavage has recently been combined with the conflict between traditionalist and modern or liberal groups. That is why many sociologists speak of a cultural

cleavage between libertarian and authoritarian groups. Finally, the cleavage between regionalist groups and those with a national orientation can be observed in Germany, but this is no longer the dangerous conflict it was in the late nineteenth century.

In addition, there is one new cleavage which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: the environmental cleavage (as already mentioned). This conflict has been growing into a kind of cultural and generational conflict. Its political representative within the German party system is the Green Party, whose supporters tend to be younger and well-educated.

1.3 The Five Parliamentary Parties

At present in Germany we have *five parliamentary parties* competing for voters and trying to mobilise their members. However, two of them can be seen as the political poles of the party system. In all Federal elections up to the present they have been the biggest parties, and throughout the history of the Federal Republic they have provided the Federal Chancellor as the head of the national government.

These two central parties are the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The Christian Democrats represent the Christian (above all Catholic) tradition, as well as the rural and agrarian tradition, and broadly speaking they constitute Germany's conservative party. In the state of Bavaria, however, the Christian Democrats have established a peculiar tradition. Here a strictly regionalist party called the Christian Social Union (CSU) was founded in the post-war years and has ever since played an independent role as the Bavarian branch of Christian Democracy.

Their political opponents are the Social Democrats, traditionally representing the workers and the trade unions, and their political programme has tended to focus on the idea of a strong and extensive welfare state. All in all, the Social Democrats have seen themselves as the party of the lower classes in Germany. However, both SPD and CDU have for some time successfully been in pursuit of support from the growing number of so-called »new middle class« voters who have no traditional alignments to one of the big parties.

Their considerable success in gaining political support from a broad range of voters is the main reason

many party sociologists have named the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats *catch all-parties*, although traditional working class or Christian–Catholic biases can still be discerned in their policies.

Apart from these two large parties there are three small parties, which generally receive approximately 5–10 per cent of the vote. They are the Free Democratic Party (FDP), a liberal and very much market-oriented party of the wealthy middle class, the already mentioned Green Party and, finally, a left-wing, post-communist party called Die Linke (The Left) with their regional and sociological strongholds in the former German Democratic Republic. The small parties usually combine with one of the two big ones to form a coalition government. Normally, the Liberals will join the Christian Democrats, and the Green Party will join the Social Democrats. The post-communist party (Die Linke) has so far formed coalitions with the SPD in a number of states, such as Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Since 2009, the Federal government has been based on a coalition of the CDU and the FDP.

1.4 Membership Parties between Mobilisation and Participation

All German parties see themselves as *membership parties*. This refers to two aspects of party life. On the one hand, party members are seen as a potential political resource, especially in election campaigns. Members can then be used as a means of mobilisation according to the plans of the party leaders. On the other hand, party members are not content to be merely *campaigning instruments*. They want to participate in political decision-making by the party by either electing the leaders or candidates for public offices and mandates or by influencing the party's political programme and platform. There seems, however, to be an inconsistency between these two membership functions. In their capacity as campaigning instruments members have to obey the leaders and follow their instructions in order to perform effectively in election campaigns. In their capacity as political participants, however, the party members want the leaders to follow the policy lines that they lay down and that involves setting limits on the power of their leaders.

There seems to be no way out of this dilemma, at least in German political parties. If you want to have an active membership you always run the risk that the

members will want to have a decisive say in party matters. Any approach to party reform must find a *delicate balance* between the logics of mobilisation and participation.

2. POLITICAL PARTIES IN CRISIS

In recent decades, various aspects of party reform have come to the fore in Germany. There are two developments that are seen as symptoms of a structural crisis of German political parties, and it is above all in the two major parties, the CDU and the SPD, that those symptoms may be discerned. The most obvious one is a steady decline in membership which has been going on for three decades now. This decline is marked in all parties but above all in the SPD: the party had more than a million members in the 1970s, but this has now shrunk to 500,000 and the decline looks set to continue. There is a similar tendency in the CDU, albeit with a certain time-lag. Membership of the CDU reached an all-time high in the late 1970s, but has been falling ever since.

This general decline in membership has two aspects of particular interest. First, the decline is generally not based on a growing tendency of party members to formally relinquish their membership status. Although there have been times when members have protested against certain policy decisions of the Social Democratic leadership and have given up their sometimes long-standing membership, such protests are not the main problem. The decisive factor is that only a small minority of younger citizens have been willing to become party members: in other words, deep demographic change is taking place. There has been a disproportionate increase in the share of older members, accompanied by a dramatic decrease in the share of younger members. The ratio between old and young members is completely out of balance.

The lack of younger people is regarded as more problematic than the simple decline in numbers, because it is above all the younger members who are needed for mobilisation and campaigning. In addition, the massive dominance of older cohorts is a problem in terms of the development of political programs. The older generations often reflect only the political needs and styles of times gone by. In periods of change, however, people expect new ideas and styles. Many party sociologists have come to the conclusion that this dominance on the part of the older generation might damage parties' abil-

ity to learn and innovate. From their critical point of view the parties are in danger of becoming »stupid organisations«, focusing on out-dated problems and policies and reluctant to face the challenges of the future.

The lack of younger people in political parties is also a problem from the standpoint of participation. Many studies have shown that citizens under 40 years of age today expect from organisations in which they are active sufficient opportunities to have a say in policy matters. If this is lacking, whether with regard to the party programmes or the appointment of leaders, they would rather not be involved in politics at all. These studies also show that the political and social engagement of younger citizens has become more spontaneous. This new attitude can be felt also in other areas. Younger people, therefore, are more reluctant not only to join political parties but also other traditional organisations, such as trade unions and churches. Even the famous German Football Association has increasingly suffered from a lack of younger members and players in recent decades (a tendency which, in the eyes of many Germans, is even more worrying than the crisis of the political parties!)

This general context of party reform is further complicated by serious problems, which are not immediately apparent, with regard to *intra-party hierarchies*. On the one hand, changes in party statutes and party reforms are possible only if the party leaders play a positive and supportive role in the reform process: only the leadership tends to have the political authority and power to bring about serious change. On the other hand, the upper echelons of political parties tend to be closely associated with the very states of affairs with regard to party organisation and party activities that have led to criticism and are in need of reform. This means that reform discussions in political parties inevitably affect the foundations upon which the party leaders have built their position and, as a consequence, they are often reluctant to support any attempts to interfere with them. In light of the ambivalent position of party elites great care must be taken to put together an effective committee in order to ensure that the outcome of deliberations is not in jeopardy before they even start.

Despite the many criticisms about the state of political parties it is important to note that party statutes already offer quite a few possibilities for participation, although they could and should be used more effec-

tively. The German Constitution clearly prescribes a democratic structure for party life.

3. PARTY ORGANISATION AND MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION

3.1 Parties and the Principle of Separation of Power

The first positive aspect of German party life and party organisation which helps to mobilise people and ensure effective participation is the fact that parties are subdivided into regional and local units with a high degree of independence from national central office. All German parties are organised administratively along federal, district and local lines. On each level, party units have some autonomy concerning political issues at that level: in other words, the party at the federal state level cannot and will not interfere with a local party unit. The same is true of the relationship between national and federal state party organisations. This vertical separation of power leaves room for particular units to discuss and make decisions about their specific problems.

A further element of intra-party democracy lies in the fact that parties may organise specific types and groups of members in specific working groups, thus creating a further functional network of sub organisations. All the parties have sub-divisions in which women, younger people or older people are organised at different levels within the party. In addition, there are similar working groups for members of certain professions and other social or cultural groups, such as workers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, Protestants and so on.

These diverse sub-divisions have given rise to mixed feelings within the parties. On the one hand, people are happy with them because they help to integrate under one roof various groups and social strata that have little contact in daily life or live in different parts of town. The working groups and regional sub-divisions thus minimise social conflicts, making members feel at home and at ease in the party. Finally, this organisational differentiation is, in the eyes of many, a stimulus to participation because members can take up those issues that are of real, personal interest to them. On the other hand, some critics have warned that political parties might slide into a state of semi-anarchy because the numerous sub-divisions and working groups could cast a shadow on common feelings of political identity. These professional and social groups have a tendency, many critics say, to establish fairly independent organisational sub-cultures

and, as a consequence, can become unwilling or unable to focus on common policy goals.

3.2 Intra-Party Communication

In addition to these sub-divisions in party organisation all parties in recent years have built up effective systems of intra-party communication in order to speed up the flow of information from central office to the regional and local parties. This has become a useful instrument for mobilising members during election campaigns, and it also has helped to professionalise party life in many ways. If a new question comes up on the political agenda it is now possible to come up with a common and official answer in a very short time and to circulate it within the party organisation. These communication systems of closed intra-net structure are fairly expensive, but in the age of the internet they have become a common and routine tool of political life in German parties. Again, feelings about these communication networks are ambivalent. There is no doubt about their usefulness as a means to mobilise members in a very short time. But quite a few critics point to the fact that they help to establish and strengthen top-down communication rather than bottom-up participation and communication. So far, these networks have been powerful instruments for mobilising members, but they have not often been used as instruments for electronic democracy yet.

3.3 Learning through Polls and Surveys

The build-up of these communication networks has been accompanied in recent years by the use of various forms of organisational or membership surveys to monitor the party base. There have been two basic forms of survey. There are membership surveys carried out by independent and university-based institutes. Currently, colleagues from Düsseldorf University are organising the most sophisticated survey of party members in Germany to date. In close cooperation with all party headquarters, the attitudes, values, political activities and behaviour patterns of a few thousand party members will be analysed and thus we shall soon have plenty of actual and broad data from which to draw conclusions about future strategies. However, the fact that virtually everybody will have access to these data is not agreeable to some, at least in a fair number of party central offices.

Because of such attitudes, most political surveys are performed under the supervision of party headquarters and specially selected, »trustworthy« survey institutes. The Social Democrats have used this monitoring instrument for several purposes in the past two decades. In 2007, they surveyed their party members in order to find out their political preferences for their new Hamburg Programme. The great advantage of all these surveys is that information is also obtained from and about members who might not show up at party conventions and whose preferences might differ from those of activists. This is important because only 5 to 10 per cent of party members can be regarded as regular activists who attend party gatherings at least once a month. Such members are not always representative of those who stay at home or participate in other activities.

In summer 2010, again the Social Democratic leaders presented the results of a broad organisational survey to the public. Ten thousand local party units had received questionnaires and asked to give honest answers about their party activities, their connections to other areas of society, the organisational standards of their units and the issues they were interested in. Some 40 per cent responded, providing a broad database of party life. One of the most interesting results was the astonishing level of apathy and discontent prevailing in large parts of the party organisation. These certainly are not very positive results for the party leadership but at least the findings show where future reform activities and reform projects should be concentrated.

3.4 Intra-Party Elections

At the highest level of mobilisation and participation members can take part directly either in the election of party leaders or in decision-making about policy issues. Of course, indirectly members are always involved in these matters, mainly by electing delegates who then join the next level of representation. However, these delegate systems are not popular any more because most proceedings are carefully planned. Spontaneous articulations of criticism, as well as open and controversial discussions are rare, and the elections of party leaders are fairly boring acclamations with predictable results. Reforms have therefore been discussed that will open up fair competition among different candidates and different positions. Above all, these competitions

will include not only delegates but also ordinary members.

The practical regulations of these intra-party electoral contests and of decision-making on important policy issues differ considerably from one party to another, often changing over the course of time. But the guiding principles always seem to be the same. First, a certain quorum of supportive members has to be attained within a certain time limit in order to start a direct democratic process. This can be a certain number of members or of party units willing to support an initiative. Only if this qualification is reached can an intra-party election or members' vote on a specific issue take place. In recent years, there have been all kinds of direct democratic decisions about candidates and issues in a wide range of parties and at different organisational levels. Sometimes party members decide on parliamentary candidates; sometimes they vote for party leadership candidates; and sometimes they vote for a party platform, which involves a wide range of issues.

In general, experiences with these attempts to give party members a direct say in party decisions have been positive. The participation level tends to be considerably higher than under the delegate system. Party members feel more satisfied, experiencing a greater sense of self-reliance and political efficacy because they have tangibly taken part in a political decision. They also tend to have stronger feelings of party identification.

Nevertheless, whenever a specific decision is reached by means of direct democracy the party decision-making process inevitably swings back into its usual delegate routine. What is still missing, therefore, is a decisive and courageous step forward to establish a fixed routine of membership involvement. These tedious returns to the traditional routine lead to frustration, especially for younger members, and it is surely off-putting to citizens with political skills and participation potential, but hesitant to join parties as active members. By shrinking from reform political parties will not be able to close the gap between participatory expectations and demands in a growing part of German society, above all in younger age cohorts. Instead, there might develop a cultural and political cleavage between the traditional parties and organisations, on one side, and the activists of modern civil society and their political styles and interests, on the other.

4. MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATION – A DELICATE BALANCE

The case of Germany clearly indicates that membership mobilization and participatory party reforms are two vital dimensions of modern party life. The German experience in these matters can make you aware of some problems that should be thought over and sorted out. First of all, the membership problems of the German parties are mainly the result of the clash of two different types of political culture. There is a traditional political culture in the Federal Republic going back to the first decades of German post-war history, and sometimes even further. In this tradition the element of active political participation does not play a very prominent and vital role. Accordingly, party members of the older generation are content to be represented by delegates and under normal circumstances they are ready to follow their party leaders. In recent years, however, another type of political culture has developed calling for active participation and a fairly critical attitude towards »decisions from above«. Most members of the younger generation are more attracted to this participatory approach to politics. Participation and democracy, in their eyes, cannot be separated.

Political parties, as well as other traditional organisations, are increasingly finding it difficult to match their organisational culture with the participatory demands of modern society. This leads to feelings of frustration and estrangement, especially among those of the younger generation who have political skills but do not perceive political parties as an attractive setting for their participatory demands. It also seems to be true that in modern societies you cannot mobilise party members without giving them more say in political decisions. This will put the party elites in a difficult position. On the one hand, they need the members as an effective political resource, especially at election time. On the other hand, party leaders today have to pay for the support and loyalty of their members by granting them opportunities to participate. Party leadership in the specific context of contemporary German society is not so much a matter of orders and obedience anymore but rather a matter of give and take.

In addition, one basic problem remains. Party sociologists still do not really know how to attract more members, especially younger ones. One good guess is that the idea of formal membership should be reconsid-

ered in a more radical way, as in the United States. There the parties try to attract political activists rather than formal party members, activists who bring with them experience from other areas of society and who participate for a short time or within a particular campaign and then probably withdraw from party politics for a while. This would surely mean a radical change in party life but maybe the traditional idea of party life is no longer a viable option in modern societies.

Almost all sociologists point to the fact that political participation is likely to bring all kinds of previously hidden conflict into the light. However, this might also constitute the first step towards negotiation and compromise. These two democratic virtues are key to fostering social harmony.

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