

**Sabbatical Report**  
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My best intentions for my sabbatical included extensive travel in Germany and personal interviews with key politicians, professors and analysts. Covid was an insurmountable obstacle to this plan. Instead, extensive reading, email correspondence, and Zoom meetings helped to answer the research questions of my project.

As stated in my sabbatical proposal, my intent was to account for the progressive demise of one of the most significant and once powerful social democratic parties in Europe. The implosion of Germany's SPD has been shared by many of the social democratic and socialist parties of Europe. The essential cause of their decline is rooted in the socioeconomic changes that swept Europe after WWII. Socialist parties had symbiotic relationships with labor unions and more broadly with Europe's large working classes. The SPD, the oldest socialist party in Europe, arose from the unrest fomenting in Germany's working class in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its electoral identity was set by the split between the social democrats who felt the welfare of the working class could be attained within the extant political system, and the communists who felt the only means of securing an acceptable standard of living for workers was to attack the system at its foundations.

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the SPD acquiesced to the cries of a majority of its members that the party could not survive as a significant political actor by restricting its appeal to the working class. At the Bad Godesberg party conference of 1959, the SPD adopted a new identity, that of a *Volkspartei*. The new roadmap for the party demanded that it take a long step away from the left and toward the center. This would invite a larger and growing electoral constituency to take another look at what the party stood for. To many of the SPD's members, this move was tantamount to ideological treason.

Nonetheless, the strategy worked. Under the dynamic leadership and broadscale appeal of Willy Brandt and later Helmut Schmidt, the SPD was propelled into government of many key *Länder* and ultimately at the Federal level. But after the long tenure of Helmut Kohl and the CDU, the short-lived government of the SPD (under Gerhard Schröder) in coalition with *Die Grünen* fostered policies that ceased to serve the party's working-class constituency. The SPD's toxic drift to the center culminated in "grand coalitions" with the CDU. The party's determination to remain in government at the cost of its political identity prompted the SPD's steady erosion at the polls and disappearance in key *Länder* governments. A reckoning about the future of the party was long overdue.

This brings us to the 2021 *Bundestag* elections. With one month left in the electoral cycle, an odd series of developments has paved a promising path for the SPD. If the

SPD emerges as the dominant party in a new coalition, it will be due more to what other parties have done rather than the SPD's own design. My research and conversations with German political experts support this contention.

Causes of the SPD's surge in the polls include: 1) the end of the Merkel era. The longest serving Chancellor in German history consistently compromised to sustain support from voters who would otherwise be in the SPD's camp. Some of the critical policies of the Merkel era (including the absorption of over 800,000 Syrian refugees) caused enormous consternation in her own party. But as has been the case with other Chancellors, Merkel was more popular than her party. That and her willingness to cooperate to build Grand Coalitions kept the CDU in power, albeit with their primary opponent. The SPD signed on to continue exerting influence at the Federal level. With Merkel's retirement, the CDU will be hard pressed to offer a candidate with matching appeal. Armin Laschet is not the answer.

2) The prospect of an *Ampelkoalition* (traffic light coalition) will attract a broad swath of the German electorate. The cooperation of the Free Democrats and Greens with the SPD is not a given. It will demand compromise, particularly with the FDP. But this is an arrangement that has worked before and can again.

3) Internal warfare in the AfD (the infamous *Alternative für Deutschland*) and their many controversial policy stances have made that party an unacceptable coalition partner for any of the other parties. Electoral support for the AfD comes largely at the expense of the CDU, not the SPD. If the SPD has a chance to form a coalition without the CDU, it will most likely do so with the Greens and the FDP. This leaves the CDU without viable coalition partners. As in the past, the small but mighty FDP may play kingmaker in this election.

4) Olaf Scholz, the SPD's Chancellor candidate, is not particularly charismatic or exciting. But the German electorate is suffering from CDU ennui, and Armin Laschet does not generate sufficient enthusiasm to propel the party forward. The SPD did not field exciting candidates for the election, but Scholz, currently the Vice Chancellor and Federal Minister of Finance, suggests quiet competence.

Germany is at the beginning of a new political era. Both of the largest parties will need to rebrand themselves. This is most difficult and imperative for the SPD

My research and correspondence over my sabbatical reinforced my knowledge of German politics and appreciation of its political and economic primacy in Europe. My continued study of the German party system and European political parties and politics will enhance the analysis and insight I bring to my students in such courses as Comparative Political Analysis, European Politics, and the Holocaust and Genocide lecture series.

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