

The First All-German Elections (November 30, 1990)

Abstract

Helmut Kohl's victory was already a foregone conclusion weeks before the early Bundestag elections in 1990. The situation, according to renowned journalist Robert Leicht, was attributable not only to Kohl's leading role in the unification process but also to serious mistakes made by the SPD. But the appearance of stability, Leicht notes, is deceptive; he predicts that Kohl's new government will be plagued by the unresolved problems of recent years.

Source

Will Everything Simply Remain the Same? Before the Bundestag Elections: Even Without a Change in Government, There Will Be a Change in the Issues

The first all-German elections, without a doubt, are a historic event. But will the outcome be anything other than the almost routine confirmation: "Keep it up, Germany"?

Based on what can be surveyed and sensed, the election results are by and large already certain. It's only a matter of the margins now – and how power will be distributed in the conservative-liberal coalition. Can the FDP clearly make a mark for itself at the expense of the chancellor's party, as it did in the last election victory of the social-liberal coalition in 1980? Even the political opponents of the government anticipate yet another victory for the Bonn coalition. *It's time for a change* – this sort of basic wave of public opinion isn't even cropping up in the opposition.

Were there – are there – no alternatives at all? Does everything have to be and stay the same because the process of German unification – during whose course walls crumbled and hardliners tumbled – is permanently cementing the political conditions here in this country?

That is definitely not the case. Certainly, we didn't experience a very exhilarating election campaign. But the political events themselves this year were more exciting than virtually ever before. Politics was exciting because it was possible at various junctures for developments to take either the right or the wrong course. And nothing about that will change in the future. The appearance of apolitical stability is only an optical illusion.

Surely there was no alternative to the speedy implementation of unification between the two German states, that is, to the policy of the government. But there were most definitely alternatives to the policies of the opposition.

German-German unification, so goes the lament of the SPD above all, pushed everything else into the background, even the fact that Helmut Kohl was looking extremely tattered even as late as the spring of 1989. That is certainly true, but it was no reason for the Social Democrats to get caught in a tailspin and fall behind in the year of unification, especially since they were the political force whose assertive détente policies were an important prerequisite for the recent upheaval (at the end of the election campaign, even Helmut Kohl formally acknowledged this in his policy statement on the CSCE summit before the Bundestag).

Unification, people say, was the hour of the executive; the government had the means to act, the opposition did not. This is certainly true, but in principle the situation was also no different in previous

years, when the Bonn government performed much more poorly.

No, the determining factor was not the assignment of roles, but rather the way in which the government and the opposition played their roles. Thus, referring to this year as the year of unification cannot conceal the present weaknesses of the Social Democrats; instead, it reveals them mercilessly.

Oskar Lafontaine, SPD chancellor candidate, succumbed to two fundamental errors in judgment. For one thing, in his historical materialistic way, he simply miscalculated. When he turned the “costs of unification” into his sole theme and horror topic, even in the last debate of the old Bundestag, he not only alienated the citizens of the former GDR but also underestimated the fact that the feeling of unity and the sense of relief over the end of dictatorship and division were stronger – also for affluent western Germans – than fears about their beloved money. The inescapability of sacrifice – no matter what form it would take, be it taxes, duties, rising interest rates – was so clear to citizens from the very start that they never really believed the chancellor’s guarantee to the contrary.

Secondly, Lafontaine deceived himself by assuming that he could only run against the chancellor if he preached the absolute opposite of government policies and rejected every trace of a “harmonizing” or even national consensus. The candidate took that approach so far that he ultimately forgot what the SPD itself had initially demanded: a rapid monetary union prior to political unification.

It might very well be that a different strategy wouldn’t have ousted the chancellor either. But it wouldn’t have pushed the SPD out of the running to such dire effect, and the soul of the party would have remained intact. But as it was, Oskar Lafontaine was the first Social Democratic candidate for chancellor whose campaign strategy relied solely on tactical maneuvers and hidden fears. The fact that Lafontaine did not effectively reach people testifies to the intelligence of the average voter. The fact that the SPD candidate even tried [to run for chancellor] would be inconceivable were it not for the fundamentally calamitous situation of his party. For who else should have run in his place?

The SPD was deeply divided on the “German question” since the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was Willy Brandt, who wanted to prevent the Social Democrats from being left out in the cold on the “national question,” and Oskar Lafontaine, who offered instead a somewhat fake internationalism. That was not a dual strategy, but rather a personified gap in faith within the party as a whole, one that chairman [Hans-Jochen] Vogel couldn’t bridge whatsoever.

An old rule of thumb says that the opposition never wins an election; if anything it’s the government that loses it. This time the sentence can be inverted: The opposition – that’s how it looked in the week before the election – lost more than the government won.

But does everything have to simply stay the same? Will there be no alternatives, not even in the medium term?

Not at all. Even without a change in government, there will be a change in the issues. The “German question” has now been answered once and for all. From the heights of a largely clear-cut policy on unification [*Deutschlandpolitik*], we are now descending again into the depths of political confusion and diffuse party constellations. If the end of division was primarily a matter of dealing with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*] for us Germans, that is, of getting rid of a burdensome legacy, then now the question of the future of our society is coming back to the fore, along with repressed problems. After the first all-German elections, political competition is opening up once again.

Let’s go back to the spring of 1989. Back then, it took the shock of the initial electoral successes of the [right-wing extremist] “Republicans” [*Republikaner*] to make the other parties realize this: in the Federal Republic, a society was forming that, if not exactly a “two-thirds society,” was one in which the vast majority of upwardly mobile, higher-income earners had forgotten about the minority that cannot keep

up, either intellectually or socially, with the rapid modernization processes of our industrial society. The fringe on the right end of the spectrum was really more a problem of top and bottom. The Republican Party collapsed within a short time, but the problem did not go away.

Quite the contrary: unification did not undo the difficulties; it increased them manifold. In addition to the top-bottom stratification in the Western part of the republic, another gap has opened up: the one between the 62 million who live in the West and the 16 million in the five new federal states. Consequently, social tensions among the population of the enlarged Federal Republic are on the rise.

In the spring of 1989, conflicts over the distribution of resources within the lower rungs of society had already come to a head due to the influx of asylum seekers and ethnic German remigrants [from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union]. As long as the Cold War persisted, and with it the division of Europe, the European boundary of affluence remained intact and hidden behind the Wall and barbed wire. Admittedly, with open political borders, the easy cementing of social boundaries is no longer possible.

In recent years, the end of the “age of social democracy” has been pronounced repeatedly. But the failure of a party by no means eliminates the problem of social justice. Achieving a just balance remains a lasting political task. That also applies to balancing the demands of the present and those of future generations, such as in the area of environmental protection. The “age of solidarity” has yet to really get started.

There was little talk of all these things during the past election campaign. The epochal event of German unification has captured all political senses. But for the time being historic events have come to an end. No one is saying that social conflicts will cease in the future and that alternatives to current party politics will no longer exist. “Keep it up!”—that certainly cannot remain the answer for very long.

Source: Robert Leicht, “Bleibt einfach alles, wie es ist? Vor der Bundestagswahl: Auch ohne Regierungswechsel kommt der Themenwechsel” *Die Zeit*, November 30, 1990.

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