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Party Landscape in the East (August 31, 2005)

With the Left Party PDS expected to perform well in the upcoming Bundestag elections, the writer reminds his readers that 70 percent of voters in the new *Länder* would still be casting their ballots for the established parties. Still, voting behavior differed in East and West: in the eastern part of Germany, party ties were weak, and parties had to recruit votes and members from social groups that differed from those they courted in the West.

The Other 70 Percent

Everyone is Staring at the Left Party – but in the East, too, the Majority is Voting for the Other Parties

From the end of July to the end of August, the chairwoman of the Saxon Left Party/PDS, Cornelia Ernst, was on another Hartz¹ tour through Saxony. As she had already done in the campaign for the Saxon Landtag [state parliament] a year ago, this uncharismatic politician readily exploited the widespread mood of protest against the labor market reform for the benefit of her party in this year's Bundestag electoral campaign. And this time, the PDS is proving even more successful than last year. While the NPD² also succeeded twelve months ago in gaining attention and votes with an anti-Hartz campaign, this time it would appear that the PDS, expanded through the addition of WASG³ and [Oskar] Lafontaine ("foreign worker"⁴), is also attracting potential NPD voters. That much, at least, is suggested by the current polls, in which the NPD ranks only among the distant "others." Unlike what happened in the 2002 Bundestag elections, which were disastrous for the PDS, this time the party has a theme.

¹ Reference to the labor market reforms that took effect between 2003 and 2005 – eds.

² The NPD [*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschland* or National Democratic Party of Germany] is among the extreme right parties – eds.

³ The WASG [*Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit* or Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice] was founded in 2004 in response to the Agenda 2010 reform package, which included various measures to modernize the labor market and social welfare system. Initially an association of dissatisfied former SPD and trade union members, it became a party at the beginning of 2005 and took part in that year's federal elections as part of an electoral alliance with the PDS – eds.

⁴ At a campaign speech in Chemnitz in June 2005, Oskar Lafontaine spoke of the need to protect low-wage earning Germans from *Fremdarbeiter* [foreign workers]. His remark was heavily criticized, not least because of his use of the term *Fremdarbeiter*, which was often used during the Hitler regime in connection with slave laborers – eds.

For weeks now, pollsters have projected that the PDS, renamed the Left Party⁵, will capture up to 30 percent of the vote in the East. This has struck fear in the hearts of politicians from the other large parties. They have declared the Left Party their chief rival, discussed whether or not campaigns tailored specifically to the East made sense, or blustered about intellectual discrepancies among the population or the frustrated people. Of course, in the process, the remaining 70 percent of Eastern voters who do not intend to put a mark next to the Left Party/PDS fell out of view. Who are these people? Overall, it is evident that the CDU and SPD, but also the FDP and the Greens, have altogether less support (and much smaller membership bases) in the new federal states, and that the ties to these parties are much weaker than in West Germany. Voters in the East, much more so than voters in the West, base their decisions on current themes, events, and individuals. Within a short period of time, election results, especially for the CDU and the SPD, have fluctuated considerably. For example, in the *Landtag* elections in Saxony-Anhalt in April 2002, the SPD was down to 20 percent (a loss of 16 percent); a mere five months later, in the Bundestag elections, it was once again the strongest party with 43.2%. In Saxony, too, such fluctuations between *Landtag* and Bundestag elections are by now a regular occurrence. The CDU result in the Bundestag elections in Saxony was already more than 20 percentage points lower than its result in the Landtag elections there. According to the latest surveys, Saxony is the one East German federal state in which the CDU can expect to be the strongest party in the upcoming Bundestag elections, with a substantial lead over the Left Party/PDS.

The demographic and occupational groups that support the CDU and the SPD in the East differ from those that support them in the West; this has to do with that fact that historical-political loyalties were largely extinguished during forty years of SED rule. For example, the CDU was able to attract a majority of the workers and even the unemployed in many elections in the East. The SPD, which once did this successfully in West Germany, is barely able to reach these voters in – of all places – Saxony and Thuringia, the central German regions in which the party originated. One thing that proved highly disadvantageous for the SPD was that it was the only party that had to make a completely fresh start in East Germany in 1990. By contrast, all its competitors could fall back on organizational structures, personnel, and membership files.

Essentially, the CDU turned out to be the party of the common people in the new states. An especially impressive demonstration of this came in the *Landtag* elections in Saxony in 1999. While the party had suffered painful losses among workers during the Bundestag elections in Saxony only a year earlier, it managed to find broad resonance within this occupational group once again, attracting 58 percent of the vote. And even 40 percent of the unemployed who went to the polls in 1999 cast their ballots for the CDU. At that time, 66 percent of voters with low educational levels (junior high/secondary school or no diploma) voted for the CDU. To be sure, in the 2004 *Landtag* elections, the CDU suffered losses across all occupational strata in Saxony, though these losses were especially pronounced among apprentices (minus 24

⁵ Officially, the party was called The Left/PDS. In June 2007, PDS and WASG officially merged. Since then, the party has been called The Left – eds.

percent), workers (minus 15 percent), and the unemployed (minus 17 percent). On the whole, however, it has remained (among other things) the party of the common people.

The SPD, with an exceedingly low level [of support] among all gainfully employed individuals in Saxony, was down to a mere 5 percent of workers' votes (minus 5 percent) and down to merely 8 percent among the unemployed (minus 1 percent). All in all, the Social Democratic Party polled a mere 9.8 percent in Saxony. Remarkably enough, the PDS also suffered losses among workers and the unemployed, achieving 18 percent and 28 percent, respectively (in each case 1 percent lower than in 1999); in spite of its massive campaign against the Hartz laws, it made significant gains only among pensioners, who are not affected by the new regulations. The starting point in the East is bad for the FDP (and also for the Greens, who have so far managed to return to an East German *Landtag* only in Saxony), because the East has no bourgeois-liberal milieu comparable to that in the West. However, during the *Landtag* elections in Saxony last year, the FDP was able for the first time to appeal to the self-employed in larger numbers: 12 percent of this occupational group (plus 9 percent) decided to vote for the FDP. Although 54 percent of the self-employed voted for the CDU, five years earlier it had still been 69 percent. However, 8 percent of this occupational group did cast their ballots for the NPD in September of 2004. Among occupational groups, the FDP received a great deal of support from apprentices, garnering 13 percent (plus 10 percent).

While the CDU suffered a 25 percent decline among voters age 18-24, the FDP gained 7 percent among this group. The party had already experienced similar success among young people in 2002 in Saxony-Anhalt, where it returned to the *Landtag* with 13.3 percent and was able to form a coalition with the CDU; the SPD in Saxony-Anhalt was punished for its work in the PDS-tolerated minority government under Minister President [Reinhard] Höppner. For nearly ten years, the SPD had been able to maintain its predominance among workers. Now it became evident that the party had not succeeded in forming a lasting bond with these core voters. While it initially looked as though the SPD would be crushed between the CDU and PDS, especially in Saxony, the Social Democrats had now fallen behind the PDS in Saxony-Anhalt as well. The hope of rendering the PDS superfluous over the long run through a rapprochement with this party – through the “Magdeburg Toleration Model,” for example, or in the form of regular coalitions, as in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, turned out to be as misguided as the second strategy, that of keeping the PDS at bay through a coalition with the CDU. At the 2004 *Landtag* elections in Brandenburg, the SPD, for many years the dominant political force there, suffered a drastic loss in votes from the common people. Hartz IV has become, especially for this group, the rallying point for the discontent that has already been brewing for quite some time. Over the past ten years, the SPD has lost 22.2 percent.

The cradle of the SPD was in regions that are now called new federal states. And yet the party is weaker in the East than anywhere else. It was the only one that had to start from zero after the *Wende*. In addition, the CDU is getting through to many classic SPD voters.

Source: Reiner Burger, "Die restlichen 70 Prozent" ["The Other 70 Percent"], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 31, 2005, p. 12.

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