Communications

German Politics in Transition

To the Editor:

Barnes, Pollock, Grace, and Sperlich in “The German Party System and the 1961 Federal Election” (in this Review, December 1962) present two central theses: that the political system of the German Federal Republic is essentially unchanged since early post war times; and that the three-party system has now become stabilized. These contentions need amplification and revision.

The 1961 German election was one of the most intensely studied elections of our time; over forty national polling surveys were commissioned by the Christian Democratic Union alone. Political scientists and sociologists at the University of Cologne, under a grant partly financed by the German National Science Foundation, conducted several nationwide surveys (as yet unpublished); four panel studies; performed detailed content analyses of mass media; and systematically interviewed politicians. Their findings—not available to Barnes and his co-authors—clearly show the extent of the changes in voter allegiance, reflecting the increasing pragmatism and the declining importance of socio-economic classes in German politics.

Barnes and his co-authors minimize the voter shift, 11.4 per cent net in this election, which in Great Britain and the United States would indeed be regarded as considerable. More important, however, the aggregate switches in individual voting behavior amounted to approximately three times the net shift in the election returns. The Cologne project shows that 13% of SPD voters switched to the CDU, that 11 per cent of the CDU voters deserted to the FDP, and that some FDP voters went over to the SPD. Nearly 60 per cent of the FDP voters were new to that party and many of them have promptly abandoned it in more recent regional elections. The SPD won almost 40 per cent of the new voters, most of whom came from the middle class. In turn, the SPD lost some working class votes to the CDU. Even the somewhat more cautious estimates of the EMNID Institute show a shift of almost 25 per cent in voter allegiance. In sum, during the last five years, the German electorate has displayed a very remarkable mobility, and in consequence, the social composition of the parties has undergone notable changes. Indeed, as our authors recognized, the two major parties today can no longer be generally described on the basis of socio-economic classes—attitudinal and related factors (especially religion) play an increasingly important role in voter preference.

There is sufficient evidence today, apparent in the 1962 state elections in North-Rhine Westphalia, Hesse, and Bavaria, that Germany has at the most a two-and-a-half party system and is moving toward a two-party system. It may well be that the FPD will disappear as a political force within the next few years because it will be unable to overcome the 5 per cent hurdle. The 1962 state elections show the FDP continuing to decline in strength, to 7 to 8 per cent of the total votes now. Nearly half of the FDP vote in the 1961 elections, therefore, may be confidently interpreted as not a vote for the FDP, but a vote against Adenauer. These voters hoped to keep a conservative government while getting rid of Adenauer, but the FDP proved unable to carry out this mandate in the post-election reconstitution of the cabinet.

Barnes and his co-authors repeat the official line of the FDP—mainly that it never promised the removal of Adenauer. Actually, FDP spokesmen repeated this pledge on numerous occasions before the election, and maintained just that the day after the election. If there was a majority consensus of opinion on any one point in the last German election, it was on the ousting of Adenauer. In a national poll in November, 1961 (DIVO, No. 326), 44 percent of the voters were in favor of his immediate resignation, 26 per cent hoped for his resignation in the near future, and only 24 per cent advocated that he continue in the government. According to several studies, half of those voting for the FDP, as already noted, voted primarily against Adenauer.

The authors also ignore the continuous (but rather private) debate going on in both major parties about changing the election law in order to facilitate majority elections. It is largely the interest groups that are in favor of a third party which they can more easily control. The Cologne surveys, employing various measures for a complete ranking of the parties, and atti-

1 See also Faul et al., Wahlen und Wähler in Westdeutschland (Villingen, 1960) and DIVO, Wähler Verhalten in der Bundesrepublik (Frankfurt, 1960). These studies emphasize the importance of religion—the equivalent of ethnic characteristics in the United States—in German voting behavior. CDU strength correlates strongly with rates of church attendance.
attitudes toward the disappearance of minor parties, found that some two-thirds of the voters would not object to having their choice reduced to the CDU and the SPD. Even among the FDP voters, about half would not feel disenfranchised by having to settle for one of the other two parties.

The authors reveal their official party-line sources clearly in the treatment of the FDP, when they describe Mende as a "strong, forceful personality . . . a distinguished World War II record," infusing the FDP "with a wholly new vitality" (p. 901). Such statements cannot be substantiated, for in fact, according to every poll, Mende's personal popularity lay far below that of any other national leader.

The authors' interpretations result in a picture of the CDU such as the CDU would like Americans to see. Few Germans would believe that the "CDU has stood for . . . the separation of Church and state" and "has opposed . . . concentrations of power . . . ." Moreover, the authors fail to indicate the existence of CDU intra-party disputes on campaign strategy. Some of the least effective slogans and issues (notably ignoring the succession issue) were forced upon CDU headquarters by the Chancellery.

The 1961 campaign was very rough, even by American standards. The CDU particularly, was helped by extra-party groups (and by the official press and government information service), some of whose agents made frequent allegations concerning Brandt's illegitimate birth, his "non-German" behavior during the war, and his alleged extra-marital love life. Many Germans resented these smears.

Most questionable of the theses is that politics in Germany will continue as in the past—a result of the authors' reading of the coalition negotiations. As Merkl notes ("Equilibrium, Structure of Interests and Leadership: Adenauer's Survival as Chancellor," in this REVIEW, September, 1962), there is widespread agreement that this election marked the end of an era. The coalition was intended by its chief negotiators to reverse the trend toward the "welfare" state, to curtail the power of the unions in a period of over-employment, and to ease the tax load for the wealthy. While these goals have not been realized, and welfare programs have continued, at the same time the opposition (the SPD together with the left wing of the CDU) is not strong enough to continue expanding these welfare measures. The commitment to ease taxes results not only in limited welfare, but also in a comparatively small German contribution to NATO and to aid for the underdeveloped countries.

Thus, German politics has entered a new stage. We find, first of all, a neutralization of opposing forces in society and a shift away from the dominance of foreign policy questions to an emphasis on domestic problems.

Second, beginning in 1959 (at the time of the first succession crisis) the character of German public opinion began to change—becoming a more independent force. Organizations such as trade unions, Catholic groups, and various study clubs began devoting more and more attention to discussion of political issues and ideologies. Thus the Chancellor in 1960 had to abandon his attempt to create a CDU-dominated TV network. The very negative public reactions to the government's handling of Der Spiegel case again underlined the fact that the German voter is no longer as passive as the authors imply. For instance, their analysis of the question of the Berlin wall inadequately explains what the building of the wall meant to the voters. According to the Cologne surveys, its major meaning was that the government was shown to be wrong in its predictions and its promises, and that for two weeks it had failed to act as a government. At the time it was Brandt who effectively defined the situation, for which he received a good deal of credit.

The German party system today is somewhere between the American type of permanent election coalitions and the traditional continental party system. Germany appears to be moving toward a party system where the program content of the parties is variable while electoral strengths remain relatively constant. Finally, the 1961 election in Germany demonstrated that public opinion and the mass media acted as a restraint upon the parties—a style of politics in many ways indistinguishable from that of other western democracies. Indeed, public opinion, for the first time, became sensitized to the style of campaigning—which paved the way for the crisis of Der Spiegel.  

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A few other points in the article need mention. First, the reason for the unusually high number of invalid votes in the Saar can be easily explained: certain political splinter groups there had asked voters to cast white ballots. Second, the relatively good showing of the CDU in both Lower Saxony and Bavaria can be explained by the presence of a sizeable reservoir of votes of a crumbling fourth party—the former DP in Lower Saxony, and the Bavarian Party in Bavaria. Third, it should be emphasized that politics in Germany has become unusually expensive—the last campaign is conservatively estimated to have cost around seventy million marks.