

A Shot Across the Bow? A Sinking Ship? The Free Democratic Party after the 2013 Federal Election

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The 2013 Federal Election in Germany brought a landslide victory for the *Christian Democratic Union* (CDU) and her Bavarian sister party the *Christian Social Union* (CSU) – or maybe, more accurately, for Chancellor Angela Merkel. This success came only as a surprise regarding its magnitude. On the other hand, the fact that the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD), a new party rallying around EU- and Euro-skeptical issues, came close to the five percent threshold caused at least some public exclamation. Looking to the past and future of Germany's party system and the nature of political competition in Germany, even the sudden success of the AfD was easily topped by the failure of the *Free Democratic Party* (FDP) to ensure parliamentary representation. Since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, the FDP had always won enough votes to enter parliament. Moreover, the FDP was part of the government coalition in 17 out of 22 governments in the period between 1949 and 2013. To put this into context, the CDU was in government 15 times while the *Social Democratic Party* (SPD) achieved this only nine times in the respective period. Hence, if we talk about the catastrophic electoral result of the FDP and the resulting drop out of the party from the Bundestag, we are not talking about a minor party but about a party that has had a major impact on German politics. What were the reasons behind this staggering electoral outcome? Furthermore, is there any indication as to whether this result is simply a warning "shot across the bow" or are we instead facing a permanent disappearance of the FDP – which would shake up ideological party camps and, consequently, the future political landscape of Germany?

After their best result on the federal level ever in 2009 with 14.6 percent, the FDP dropped nearly 10 percentage points and fell to 4.8 percent in 2013. In absolute numbers, they managed to lose more than 4.2 million votes while forming a governing coalition with the CDU and the CSU led by Chancellor Merkel. When the coalition was established in 2009, it was described by the leaders of all three parties as a "love-match". The divorce by voters' verdict left the CDU/CSU unscathed while the FDP was severely punished. Observers agree that the FDP's very good result in 2009 was at least in part caused by the fact that German voters were unwilling to have another grand coalition of CDU, SPD and CSU¹. In addition, the SPD had been in government for eleven years (1998 to 2009) and there was certain fatigue in the public which manifested itself in the worst ever electoral result of the SPD on the federal level. The only realistic alternative was a black-yellow-coalition formed by the Union parties and the FDP. The nature of the mixed-member electoral system did its part as well. Strategic ticket-splitting – nominal vote for the candidates of CDU or CSU (the latter only running in Bavaria) and party vote for the FDP – helped to ensure a comfortable majority in parliament for the black-yellow coalition. The German Constitutional Court declared the electoral law as it was applied in 2009 to be unconstitutional and under the new electoral law strategic-ticket splitting is no longer paying off. While the old system allowed for surplus seats under certain circumstances, the new system is fully proportional for all parties above the five percent threshold. In other words, the seat distribution in the Bundestag now has to be fully proportional to the party vote shares.

This did not stop the FDP from starting a last minute panic campaign addressed to voters of CDU and CSU asking them to give their party vote to the FDP. As we know now, the campaign was not at all successful. At the same time, neither the ideal context in 2009 regarding the citizenry's will for government and policy

Summary: The Free Democratic Party's (FDP) failure to win parliamentary representation in the 2013 German Federal Election constitutes more than a warning. After winning more votes than ever in 2009, the party's too narrow policy agenda, unpopular top politicians, scandals and problems regarding reorganization left and still leave the FDP in dangerous waters. Having lost representation in many Länder parliaments as well, the FDP needs to reform rather quickly or it might disappear completely.

change, nor the new electoral law are fully able to explain the massive loss in popular support for the FDP.

At least four other aspects strongly and negatively affected the FDP's electoral performance in the recent election. Firstly, the liberal core of the FDP's program was highly economy centered. While they were a social-liberal party in the 1970s and 80s, more and more they have become advocates of the neo-liberal crusade. Deregulation of markets, reduction of tax rates, more flexible labor market, and restriction of state capacities became the mantra of a new generation of FDP politicians. As the banking crisis swept over the Atlantic, leading FDP politicians still argued that this was not caused by the absence of national and international regulation but by the fact that deregulation efforts have fallen short. Their 2009 electoral campaign emphasized especially the necessity of tax reductions to ensure prosperity and economic development. Even after four years in power, they remained incapable of implementing these electoral promises. Although this failure was, at least in part, a direct consequence of the economic crisis and the reluctance of the CDU/CSU to jeopardize a more or less balanced budget, voters were rather unforgiving. In addition, it did not help that one of the few tax laws the party did manage to implement was seen as clientelist politics because it reduced the tax burden merely for the hotel industry. Even the fact that the German economy did rather well between 2009 and 2013, and that there was no perceivable economic crisis failed to change voters' perceptions: the merits were ascribed to Chancellor Merkel and her Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, and, ultimately, to their party – the CDU/CSU.

Secondly, criticism and disappointment was not limited to the failure of policy-making: top politicians as well as ministers of the FDP rather quickly lost their popularity after the 2009 election. This became most obvious in regard to Guido Westerwelle who was the celebrated party leader responsible for the best electoral result ever in 2009 and who became foreign minister in the CDU/CSU and FDP coalition. Despite the fact that, traditionally, foreign ministers retain high popularity levels in Germany – often even being the most popular politicians – Westerwelle's standing with the public diminished rapidly. In addition, the FDP was rather unsuccessful in several regional elections following the 2009 federal election and this downward trend was linked directly to his abilities as party leader. Unfortunately, the remaining FDP ministers failed to redeem the party in the eyes of the public. On the contrary: several high ranking FDP politicians and ministers were involved in scandals which included accusations of sexual harassment or the usage of government aircrafts to transport privately purchased furniture.

Hence, it was hardly surprising when, in 2011, Westerwelle decided against campaigning to remain the party's leader. After Westerwelle's departure in 2011, Phillip Rösler became the next party leader and he initiated some reshuffling both in regard to ministries – he himself switched from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Economy – as well as in regard to high ranking party officials. Despite some positive signals, these decisions were unable to stop internal conflicts and debates and, maybe more importantly, the party's electoral support dwindled even more. Polls showed the FDP consistently below the five percent threshold. It did not take long for Rösler to become the most unpopular politician in the eyes of the public either. Hence, the unsuccessful reorganization of the party leadership constitutes a third reason for the 2013 electoral loss.

Finally, although the FDP achieved some good results in regional elections in 2012 and 2013, these results were achieved at a certain price. In Schleswig-Holstein – a small northern state – the top regional FDP candidate openly opposed federal policies and federal politicians of his own party which brought the FDP the second best result ever in this state. In North Rhine Westphalia, Germany's most populated state, Christian Lindner became the top candidate despite the fact that, one year earlier, he had stepped down from a high ranking party office on the federal level because of internal controversies with the new party leader Rösler and others. While his nomination alone was already a statement, the dissatisfaction with the federal party leadership became even more obvious when the official campaign slogan was revealed: "THIS is my FDP" ("DAS ist meine



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FDP"). The slogan was clearly a reckoning with the national party leadership and their course of action since coming into power in 2009. Hence, while the party's regional electoral performance was in stark contrast to the federal polls, there was little reason to assume that this would help the FDP on the national level because these successes were, at least in part, directed against the national party leaders and their performance while in government.

All in all, there have been many reasons leading to the FDP's drop from their best to their worst result on the national level in only four years. Whether we witnessed only a singular event or the beginning of the end of one of the traditional German parties remains to be seen. For example, if we look to parliamentary representation on the regional level, the FDP is in much better shape today than it was in the mid-90s early 2000s. Currently, the party has parliamentary representation in nine out of 16 regional chambers; in the period between 1996 and 2000, the FDP only held seats in four chambers. Moreover, the unsuccessful and rather unpopular party leader Rösler stepped down – as did several other high ranking party officials – directly following the 2013 elections. In December 2013, Christian Lindner became party leader and a new board of surrogates was elected. This represents a clear effort to wipe the slate clean in terms of personnel. At the same time, the speeches during the party congress called for a reversion to clear liberal policy positions as part of a rebuilding process.

It is much too early to see any effects of this restructuring on public opinion – the December polls still locate the FDP below five percent. With the exception of the elections to the European Parliament (EP) in May 2014, there are no events besides local elections in the first half of the coming year. For the EP elections, the legal threshold is mere three percent which should guarantee parliamentary representation for the FDP. Moreover, only five out of 16 states hold elections in the next two years. In other words, the FDP has some time for restructuring and redefinition of their political program. This situation could prove to be blessing and curse at the same time: Blessing because the party dearly needs a new start and a new image. But it is also a dangerous situation because a party without representation on the national level gets much less attention in public and there are only limited possibilities to achieve positive electoral results on the regional level in the near future. Other parties might use this window of opportunity and take over both classical policy issues of the FDP as well as traditional FDP voters. The ship might not be sinking – but it has received a crippling blow while being far away from the shore.

References

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