

Mitte.

CDU



Expert Comment

Thuringia: Lessons for representative democracy in Germany and beyond

Jürgen Grote (2020)

Leaving the 'Mitte': As Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer departs centre stage is the CDU itself also forsaking the democratic centre?
(Credit: Carsten Koall/Stringer/Getty Images News/Getty)

Copyright © 2020 by Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute

The right of Jürgen Grote to be identified as the author of this publication is hereby asserted.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the original author(s) and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views and opinions of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, its co-founders, or its staff members.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please write to the publisher:

Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute gGmbH
Französische Straße 23
10117 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 209677900
info@doc-research.org

Thuringia: Lessons for representative democracy in Germany and beyond

Jürgen Grote

The election of a Minister President in the region of Thuringia has shaken Germany's entire political class and represents a veritable earthquake. What is happening in supposedly one of the Western world's most stable democracies? The resignation of a regional Minister President, the sacking of the government representative for the East German *Länder*, the announcement of a regional party chairman's withdrawal, the renunciation of the candidature for chancellorship, and the prospective resignation of a party leader at the national level – all that in less than a week!

What does it mean, what else is still to come, and what events have triggered this messy situation? These questions do not only concern the political landscape of a minor region in Germany; they have great significance for the entire country and for many others in Europe.

This is a story of how a combination of organisational self-interest from specific political parties and individual lust for power and career advancement in representing these parties may ultimately lead to weird and politically obscene outcomes. Such outcomes ultimately undermine the very basis of representative democracy: responsiveness, responsibility, accountability, and transparency.

In any case, there is a broad understanding that Germany is facing one of its most severe crises since the Republic's founding.

One is advised to embark on an excursion into a not-too-distant past before familiarising oneself with the dynamics of the most recent events. It may then be possible to

discuss the incidents in a broader context and speculate about the eventual implications this might have with respect to the status quo and the future of representative democracy in general.

Nota bene, the comments made in what follows only refer to the significance of what will later be called the 'original sin'. No further remarks are made concerning the subsequent staff changes within the parties that have been triggered by the events. These are of great significance and are changing every day at the time of writing. However, a couple of speculations will be added with reference to likely the future restructuring of Germany's entire political landscape.

A remote past?

With slightly more than two million inhabitants, Thuringia ranks twelfth among the 16 Länder of the Federal Republic in terms of population size. The history of the region is noteworthy. It became a centre of German culture in the 18th and 19th centuries owing its prestige and fame for what came to be called the *Weimar Klassik*. The region was home to classical literature (Wieland, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Brentano, Schlegel), philosophy (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche), and music (Liszt, Strauss).

In the 20th century, the city of Weimar, one of the region's four biggest agglomerations, gained importance when the defeated German Empire turned into a republic, convened a national assembly meeting in the city, and adopted a constitution on 11 August 1919 (the *Weimar Republic*). Unfortunately, the hopes invested in parliamentary democracy came to fade away towards the end of the next decade when the National Socialists managed to triple their votes in Thuringia's regional elections (1929), and just one year later, were granted access to a government coalition led by liberals and conservatives. This marked the first entry into government of the NSDAP in Germany. None of the other

parties felt particularly disturbed by the presence of the fascist faction, whose members were subsequently accredited two ministerial portfolios, home affairs and education.

Only two months later, in March 1930, the coalition enacted a so-called *Ermächtigungsgesetz* (enabling statute), according to which legally binding decrees could be released by simple majority. This was immediately followed by the dismissal of social democratic, communist, and other untrustworthy figures from their positions as mayors and office-holders, and soon after, by their substitution with candidates from the National Socialists. Fascism then began to use its institutional power for the diffusion of racist and anti-Semitic ideology and for the prohibition of allegedly anti-German movies and theatre plays.

In February 1930, the party leader Adolf Hitler underlined the importance of Thuringia for the NSDAP's growing public recognition and respectability: "We achieved our greatest success in Thuringia where we have really become the crucial party. The other parties in the region, which until now formed the government, will not manage to get any majority without our consent and collaboration." It is well known how that story ended and we do not need to comment on that any further.

After reunification: from conservative towards left leaning governments

After twelve years of fascist rule, following the surrender of the country to allied forces, after millions of casualties and millions of concentration camp deaths, Thuringia eventually became part of the German Democratic Republic from 1949 until 1989. During the three decades since re-unification in 1990, of the seven elections to regional parliament, five have resulted in (coalition) governments under the leadership of the CDU, which governed until 2014.

The region witnessed a turnaround in 2014 when Die Linke, the left-wing party founded in 2007, gained a share of 28.2% of the vote and formed a red-red-green coalition governing quite successfully throughout the legislative period until 2019.

	CDU	Linke	AfD	SPD	Grüne	FDP
2014	33.5	28.2	10.6	12.4	5.7	2.5
2019	21.7	31.0	23.4	8.2	5.2	5.0

In that year, Die Linke was even able to increase its share of the vote, gaining 31% of votes. With merely 21.7%, the CDU suffered substantial losses while the Liberals (FDP) barely scraped into the local parliament, bypassing the 5% threshold by only 70 votes. The real winner was the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which entered parliament for the first time in 2014 and more than doubled its votes in 2019.

The obscure election of a Minister President

Since Christian Democrats and Liberals were not available for a coalition with the Die Linke, the members of the previous red-red-green coalition opted for a minority cabinet that would have to be confirmed by parliamentary vote in February 2020. Going for a minority cabinet seemed all the more obvious as approval ratings for Bodo Ramelow – the left-wing leader of the previous government – clearly improved and had come to rank at about 70% in opinion recent surveys. Conservatives and liberals made clear that there was a political equidistance and, therefore, complete incompatibility, between their own positions and the positions of Die Linke and of the AfD alike.

This is not self-explanatory. While the positions of the CDU, FDP and Die Linke quite often converged with respect to concrete proposals in day-to-day politics, there is a clear distance separating the former two from the AfD. The AfD is not a fascist party. However, it

has an extreme fascist wing at its fringes that is constantly growing in importance, even at the national level. The leader of that faction, Björn Höcke, happens to be regional party chief and group chairman in the Thuringia parliament. According to a recent judgement by an administrative court, one can call him a fascist without the threat of legal sanction.

Be that as it may, with the CDU and the FDP not supporting either Die Linke or the AfD, a majority of votes for the existing coalition could have been taken for granted.

Instead, the vote threw up a shock result reverberating beyond the borders of the small state and involving the entire country's political class. What happened, in brief, is the following. There were only two candidates in the first two rounds of voting: the red-red-green coalition leader and the candidate of the far right, himself an unknown mayor of a minor town not even affiliated with the party. Neither of these managed to gain an absolute majority.

In the third and final round, with a relative majority of votes being enough, the FDP put forward a candidate who, unexpectedly at first glance, gained the entire vote share of the CDU, FDP, and AfD combined. At the same time, the right-wing candidate was not even elected by a single member of his own party and thus gained zero votes.

Hence, there must have been a kind of informal pact between conservatives, liberals, and the extreme right – a pact struck far ahead of the election date.

Asked whether he would accept the vote, the FDP candidate, without hesitation, confirmed the mandate and was elected Minister President of Thuringia. While this came as a surprise to members of the incumbent coalition, members of the other three parties emphatically congratulated themselves and the winner of the election. Later, it turned out that the AfD had sought a deal well before the final political shock. It had approached members of the CDU and the FDP in written form with a view of hammering out a deal to enable a so-called *bürgerlich* (centre-right) majority without the risk of any of the participating parties losing face.



One of the first to shake hands and congratulate the winner was Thuringia's AfD leader Björn Höcke. Pictures of this moment were immediately circulated by media juxtaposing it with that of Hitler greeting the then-German President Paul von Hindenburg on 21 March 1933. Yet, Höcke was not the only one complimenting the result. Reactions among many prominent Christian Democrat and the Liberal figures initially oscillated between friendly consent and open enthusiasm, both at regional and national levels. At the same time, more enlightened politicians spoke of a political dam break and it was these voices that eventually dominated the debate in the following days.

Political and media reactions

Only a couple of hours after the election, the affair had shaken the entire political landscape and prompted national outrage. Wednesday's vote was a political earthquake because it was the first time the AfD had helped to form a government in Germany, breaking a consensus among the main parties regarding over collaboration with right-wing populists. Although hardly any of the prominent CDU or FDP figures made explicit reference to the historical similarity of bringing fascists into government by way of either formal or informal coalition, the past was suddenly present again.

The event was described by the media in terms of an assortment of the most unpleasant vices: horrifying and disgusting scandal; historical amnesia; dirty affair; lack of

professionalism; political dilettantism; deliberate coup carefully prepared in backroom meetings; simple stupidity; unforgivable event; unexpected seizure, ambush; involuntary or instinctive reaction; lust for power; collusive attack; fatal attraction; accident; irresponsibility; escapade; break of taboo; and so on and so forth.

While the FDP leader, Christian Lindner, rejected accusations that the vote had been pre-agreed with the far right, saying he had been surprised by the outcome, the CDU Secretary General came out with a clearer and more critical response: “The FDP has played with fire and set our entire country alight”. He added that a government that had the support of “Nazis like Höcke” could not be the basis for a stable government and urged fresh elections in the state. The CDU’s national party leader said her party’s politicians in Thuringia had acted “against our will”, and Angela Merkel, while on visit to South Africa at the time, demanded an “immediate revocation” of the election results.

Taken by surprise by these harsh reactions, many CDU and Liberal supporters soon peddled back. Some even admitted their guilt and openly excused themselves by arguing that this had all come unexpectedly, thus creating a situation in which nobody could have reacted instantly in the most appropriate manner. However, it only took a couple of days until references to the ‘original sin’ fully disappeared both from the media and from comments issued by party leaders. Everything had quickly become a mere question of a change of personnel. The focus on the merry go round of political staff and officeholders now dominated the debate, not least as a result of several retreats and dismissals.

In any case, the fact that ninety years after the rise of the Nazi party, the far right has again played a role of a kingmaker in Germany has now become secondary, irrespective of the country’s long-lasting ‘never again’ pledge and of the commemorations of World War Two and Nazi death camp atrocities just a week before the event.

Those in part responsible for the scandal have now come to agree that psychologising may be the least dangerous way out of the malaise. When accepting his

mandate shortly after the announcement of voting results, the newly elected Minister President is said to have simply been overwhelmed by an outcome that nobody could have expected. It would have been due to his political inexperience that he did not immediately refuse acceptance as the candidate of the far right. In no way should the event be taken to indicate any fundamental 'sympathies with the devil' from any of the participating parties.

A couple of key reflections

Of all reasons presented, four general conclusions suggest themselves. The events are the outcome of the pursuit of organisational self-interest of political parties mainly interested in their own reproduction and survival. Secondly, they have been nurtured by greed and the lust for power and personal advancement on the part of individual representatives of these parties. Thirdly, both of the above are indicative of the remoteness of parties and party leaders from their electorates and from the will of the people. Finally, the whole affair has most likely been an attempt to launch a trial balloon for scrutinising the prospects of success for this kind of 'unconventional' alliance, in forthcoming elections elsewhere in Germany.

Sadly, none of these explanatory factors will disappear soon, and none will enhance the chances of the people being heard, listened to, and properly represented in the political realm. It is this that represents a veritable threat to the mechanisms of representative democracy itself.

If Marx was right with respect to capitalist forms of production when arguing that it is "the bourgeoisie which produces is its own grave diggers", then the question of what the grave diggers of parliamentary democracy will look like is a valid one. Is it merely the presence of some weird extremist-cum-populist fringe parties that are mixing things up, or should we look to the remoteness and detachment of a majoritarian political elite mainly interested in the retention of power without regard for the concerns of the population?

Several concepts and quotations that have often popped up in German history immediately come to mind when looking at the disaster. One is Nietzsche's "ever-present return of the same". Another one is Marx' famous dictum that "history always repeats itself – first as tragedy, second as farce". Not least, Brecht's warning made in his *Arturo Ui*, that "the womb is still fertile, from which it crept".

Such associations notwithstanding, direct references to Weimar tend to be futile. The institutions of the Federal Republic are consolidated such that any straightforward comparison with the past is inaccurate. Nevertheless, there are legitimate doubts with respect to political personnel at the upper echelons of these institutions as to whether they have learned their historical lessons.

The implosion of the political middle ground

Would something similar have occurred in another country or a remote region, say, in the North of France or the South of Italy, nobody would have cared or felt alarmed. But this happened in a country, or more precisely in a historically and politically biased region of that country, which had already served as a test bed for the legal seizure of power by fascists almost exactly 90 years ago.

What is clear is that a taboo has been broken. This was underlined by many observers and politicians across all major political parties in the election's immediate aftermath. Once effectively broken, however, it is no taboo anymore. It is precisely this that the German political landscape will have to deal with in the foreseeable future. The break of taboo is only the latest step in a process that was set in motion quite some time ago and which can be expected to reach far into the future.

This is ultimately a process of a rupture in the political centre, or more precisely, of what some still believe to be the centre. Hardly anything unites the established parties as much as the conviction that "elections are to be won in the centre" and that anybody

trespassing the boundaries of that imagined space runs the risk of marginalisation. This may be unwarranted. Although no mainstream politician seems able or willing to take account of this, under current political conditions it is in the centre where elections tend to be lost.

It is tempting to speculate about the configuration and the fate of that swampy centre-ground terrain. Where will those who claim to occupy what is increasingly becoming a hollow core end up? Will 'the centre' just shift leftwards or rightwards or will it become fully decomposed without any chance of restoration in the foreseeable future? These questions may be approached by turning to two possible scenarios – one concerning the structure of the political landscape altogether and the other related to potential splits running through many, if not all, parties operating in that landscape.

The first scenario has to do with the political ecology of the party system. This does not require any change in organisational terms. It is more a case of splits and the re-arrangement of established political boundaries. In Thuringia, many have referred to broken firewalls separating the political centre from right-wing extremism. The message sweeping through all news agencies was one of a historical landslide opening the political floodgates to the extreme right.

At the same time, and largely unobserved, a new firewall is slowly emerging, running right through the very core of the political spectrum and thus separating what could be called the centre-right (CDU, FDP, AfD) from the centre-left (SPD, the Greens, and Die Linke). There is a rupture within the political centre ground that is splitting the political landscape into two blocks which, over time, may become increasingly irreconcilable.

All this happens despite the feverish conjuring of an alleged political centre as predominantly evoked by Christian Democrats and Liberals, who claim to form part of it. It is these two parties which are drawn by their electorates towards the right of the political spectrum so that alliances that also include the AfD are becoming more and more likely. Something similar may happen on the part of the opposite political camp. To the extent that

concerns for redistribution, social justice, and equality will become as important as environmental concerns, the formation of a leftist block consisting of the SPD, the Greens and Die Linke cannot completely be ruled out.

Attempts to resurrect the centre, however, will almost certainly end up in the kind of political impasse the country has been witnessing for quite some time. The breach of taboo in the Thuringia elections may just be the ultimate sign for a full dissolution of the centre.

The second scenario would be an offspring of the first. In contrast, it would require organisational engineering and formal change. Of course, parties belonging to either of the two blocks may over time make themselves comfortable behind the trenches separating left-wing from right-wing coalitions. The firewall would then be consolidated and defection from one camp to another would become the exception.

What is more realistic is the assumption that there will continue to be opposing views, not only across the blocks but also within each of the 'block parties'. These would eventually result in veritable splits running through one or more parties on both sides. Some people would express sympathies for the reconstruction of the prior situation – a however shady centre – while others would lean towards more leftist or more right-wing positions. Drawing their adherents from both political blocks, the former of these two would then gather and (re-)build what was once the centre.

This new party may be less of the 'catch-all' type of the past, but potential members would come from the entire spectrum of the existing political landscape. Albeit not necessarily reflecting that same pattern, other European countries have already experimented with similar arrangements without, however, managing to be successful for longer periods of time.

Many other scenarios are possible. Just think at France, Britain, and Italy. They are currently widely discussed in the media. Yet even the most radical restructuring of the party system, or of individual parties acting within it, would change a lot with respect to a really

crucial question: how can more adequate representation of the will of the people be guaranteed, so as to avoid social, political, geographical, or any other bias?

What future for representative democracy?

It cannot be that the candidate of a politically insignificant party who has only gained 5% of the vote is selected as the leading representative of a federal state by an informal and obtuse alliance that also includes fascist figures. Of course, this may only be a specifically German aberration with limited significance in terms of time and substance.

In institutional terms, however, the affair has implications touching upon the core mechanism of representative democracy in Germany and further afield. Facing implosion, disintegration, defection, collusion and the like, it is the entire system that is currently under siege. Other countries may have already had their experiences with this unpleasant situation, less rigid and clumsy in institutional terms compared to the German case. Some have found temporary solutions by muddling through and by resorting to weird experiments, however short-lived these may have been in the last instance.

All of this notwithstanding, the very fact that popular sovereignty is severely threatened in more general terms has been discussed for decades in academic circles by democracy theorists, by scholars of public administration, and by others. Despite the obvious crisis of representative democracy, the results of these deliberations have hardly ever managed to penetrate the surface of everyday political discourse.

It is incomprehensible that a type of system which, admittedly, has performed very well over a long period of time, is still (mis-)represented as the one and only conceivable mechanism for expressing the will of the people. Excluding the most explicit manifestations of what has been called “post-democracy” by authors such as Colin Crouch, namely those resting on authoritarian rule (Trump, Orban, Johnson, and others), numerous forward-looking forms of ‘democracy with adjectives’ have been proposed in the relevant literature.

To name just a few, think of pluralist, corporatist, direct, expert, participatory, libertarian, deliberative, assembly, plebiscitary, legalist, citizen, competitive, advocacy, guardian, by voucher, input-based, output-based, by lottery, reflexive, epistocracy democracy, and so forth.

Nota bene, hardly any of these recipes argue for the disbanding of traditional representative forms of democracy. Most of them see their respective model as a complement to what is in place already. The fact that hardly any of them have made it into the discourses of office holders and political parties is ultimately due to a defensive attitude rooted in a combination of the personal lust for power, organisational self-interest, and elitist remoteness from the real world. Taken together, these factors are simply too strong to allow even the tiniest institutional modification to eventually increase responsiveness, accountability, and transparency. There still is a long way to go before we may witness a form of democracy that corresponds to shifting involvements, concerns, identities, and their means of political representation. What just happened in Thuringia is clearly further complicating the situation.

Jürgen Grote

Senior Researcher, Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute