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Confronted with new Challenges:

Trends and Developments of the German Party System in the Light  
of the Last Elections

1. The outcome of the election in Bavaria offers a unique opportunity to analyze some of the current trends of the German party system. It symbolizes – like in a big nutshell – many of the problems the German party system is confronted with. From an American perspective that what happened in Bavaria is, of course, less important than what happened on Monday at the Wall Street. But both cases have something in common: they triggered shock waves. German commentators used a couple of terms to describe what occurred in Bavaria: revolution (BILD-Zeitung), Höllensturz (Süddeutsche-Zeitung), and end of an era (FAZ). But many used also the term political earthquake, and I think this is precisely the right metaphor to illustrate the historical dimension of this break: it rattled the foundation of the Bavarian party systems and, on the same token, it shook up the party headquarters in Berlin. Since Sunday Bavaria is no longer the strong and stable island in a sea of uncertainty, erosion and instability of the German party system.
2. To underline why this outcome was much more than a usual defeat in elections I will briefly sum up some of the core elements of the exceptional and unique role of the CSU not only in Bavaria but in Germany and among European parties in general
  - The hegemony of the CSU in Bavaria was based for decades on the capability to bring together modernization with tradition, social policies with economic progress, political leadership with people's mobilization, Bavarian identity with German patriotism, a deep social rootedness with a strong party organization.

- Since the 1960ties the CSU managed to achieve an absolute majority of votes and seats in the Bavarian parliament. In 2003 she even obtained a two third majority of seats.

CSU Elections Results

1962	47,5
1966	48,1
1970	56,4
1974	62,1
1978	59,1
1982	58,3
1986	55,8
1990	54,9
1994	52,8
1998	52,9
2003	60,7
2008	43,4

- She was, for nearly five decades the only ruling party, and deeply coined the politics in Bavaria in this period. Bavaria and the CSU – both were just two sides of the same token, inseparably connected with each other.

- The CSU was the main agent of post-war industrialization in Bavaria and managed to adapt the traditional Bavarian identity to a modern industrial setting.<sup>1</sup>

- It transformed itself into a mass-based inter-confessional party and made itself attractive for different voter groups and classes which also embraced strongholds which vote for the SPD.

- Although promoting a market economy, the CSU never neglected the “responsibility of the state to take care for its citizens”<sup>2</sup>. In this sense the “S” in the party’s name was more than justified.

<sup>1</sup> See Hepburn, Eve: The Neglected Nation: The CSU and the Territorial Cleavage in Bavarian Party Politics, in: German Politics, 17/2, 190.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., S. 191.

- Finally: The CSU managed to combine its role as a regional party with a strong influence on the federal level. The Union with the CDU “enabled it to participate in federal politics [...] and fill cabinet posts in CDU-CSU governments”<sup>3</sup>.

3. Taking these elements into account it becomes rather clear why the CSU is really shocked by the outcome of this election: she lost majority rule in Bavaria, she lost influence on federal politics (which has shrunk already after the establishment of the Grand Coalition on the national level), and she lost the certainty that nothing can challenge its predominant position in Bavaria. Finally, consequences for the majority of Liberals and Conservatives in the Bundesversammlung and in the Federal Council could not be excluded.
4. This negative evaluation is even more surprising when we remind ourselves, that Bavaria is in nearly every respect the most successful federal state in Germany – with a stable financial and economic performance and one of the lowest unemployment rates in Germany. Chancellor Angela Merkel used to say on her tour during the Bavarian election campaign that Bavaria achieved a position which should be the model for the whole of Germany.
5. It is easy to identify some of the short term reasons for the devastating defeat of the CSU:
  - The circumstances of the Stoiber retreat revealed already that something went wrong in the party last year.
  - The new established tandem at the top of the party, Beckstein and Huber, at no point fulfilled the expectations which were put on them. That means the party had a leadership problem.
  - A series of scandals around the Transrapid and the Bavarian Landesbank (which lost more than 500 million Euros in speculative transactions at the stock markets) scratched on the successful image of the CSU and led to more discomfort among the electorate.
  - Many citizens in Bavaria believe that the CSU developed over the last years an arrogance of power neglecting the needs and demands of the people. Particularly the strict non-smoker law for pubs and restaurants annoyed a lot of voters.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

- The education policy of the CSU with a conservative and traditional strand was rather controversial over the last years. The Bavarian education system offers little opportunities for children from lower social classes and for those with a migration background.

- In the past 40 years the competing parties of the CSU in Bavaria were more or less regarded as Bavarian branches of federal parties, lacking the flavour of true Bavarian culture and tradition. But this time a competitive middle class party, the Free Voter Association, deeply rooted in the Bavarian communities and thus also addressing Bavarian culture and tradition challenged the CSU. This is probably one of the most striking points for the defeat of the CSU, and reminds the party painfully of the success of the Bavarian Party in the 1950ties when she lost power.

6. To what extent reflects the surprising outcome of the Bavarian election some of the major problems and trends of the all German party system? In my point of view the Bavarian election is, for the time being, the last step in the structural change of the German party system. Looking back to the period from the mid 1950ties until the mid 1980ties the German party system was often described as hyper-stable although it had undergone frequent changes over time. Evidence of such hyperstability was found in the low degree of the fragmentation, polarization and segmentation of the party system, the low number of government changes since the founding of the Federal Republic, and the high degree of voter turnout. Today the picture looks different. Voter turnout is continuously decreasing, government changes from one period to the other become more likely, the differentiation of the party systems proceeds, and coalition building is much more complicated than in those good old days. In a couple of superficial contributions it looks like that the new challenges started more or less with the success of the united Linkspartei in the Bundestag elections of 2005, and in the Länder elections of Bremen, Lower Saxony, Hesse, and Hamburg. But this is a very westernized perspective because the impact of the unification gave already birth to many of the problems and trends we are confronted with, in East Germany during the 1990ties. Many political observers initially assumed that the West German party system would establish itself in East Germany too. The PDS was seen as a temporary flaw that would soon disappear. In the course of a process of

concentration, however, the outline of a three-party system, consisting of CDU, SPD and PDS, began to take shape in the new Länder after the elections in 1994. Then again, since the late 1990s, exactly the opposite tendency can be observed. The fragmentation of the party system in East Germany has clearly increased, particularly as a result of the successes of the right-wing extremist parties. In 2004 in Saxony, six parties were elected to parliament – more than in any other federal state. The political spectrum of the parties ranges from the PDS to the right-wing extremist NPD, and is a strong indicator of the degree of polarisation that has taken place. Also the degree of segmentation was and is very high in the East German party system. Until 1998, the PDS was not considered by either of the major parties to be a valid coalition partner, and the PDS in turn, perceived itself as a fundamental opposition party. This meant that since the early 1990s, in a number of East German states majority rule was only possible in coalitions between the CDU and the SPD. But the parties also started to experience with new forms of coalition building. In Brandenburg a so called traffic-light coalition was established, and in Saxony-Anhalt the SPD tested the model of minority rule tolerated by the PDS in 1994 before the PDS was finally accepted as a formal coalition partner in the first red-red government which was formed in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in 1998. Grand coalitions remained, however, in many cases the only alternative in Eastern German states. In four of five East German Länder Grand Coalition are in government.

7. But also a closer look to the development in the West underlines that the structural changes of the German party system started already more than 20 years ago. The erosion of the stability of the West-German party system arose when the Greens managed to enter the Bundestag in 1983 for the first time. Particularly in the 1990ties the Länder parliaments and governments in the West became much more colourful than before. Beside pure SPD- and CDU-governments red-green, black-yellow, red-yellow, red-green-yellow and grand coalitions were formed in this period. When the right-populist Republikaner party got nearly 11 percent of the vote in Baden-Wuerttemberg in 1992 and were thus on a par with the FDP and the Greens, the CDU and the SPD had no choice but to enter into a temporary coalition, as any other form of parliamentary majority would not have been politically possible. In Bremen, in

1995, after the failure of the so-called "traffic-light" coalition (SPD, FDP and Greens), a grand coalition was formed, and governed until the election in May 2007. Finally, in Schleswig-Holstein, a political deadlock brought about a grand coalition in the spring of 2005. To sum up, it can be said that since the 1990ties grand coalitions were no longer the exception, but the most common type of coalition building on the German Länder level. The forming of the national grand coalition after the Bundestag election in 2005 was thus just the continuation of a trend that already begun to take shape in several previous Landtag elections.

8. The outcome of the latest elections, I would like to argue, continue in so far a trend that emerged already long before. What are the main characteristics of this trend?

- The two mainstream parties have lost their capability to bind and integrate voters from their traditional constituencies. Together their elections results tend to move to 60 per cent. The reasons are extensively discussed in the research literature: the erosion of traditional milieus, social-structural change, change of occupational structures, pluralisation of life styles a shrinking believe in the ability of problem solving by the ruling parties.

Results of Bundestag Elections for CDU, CSU and SPD

	CDU	CSU	SPD	Together
1972	35,2	9,7	45,8	<b>90,7</b>
1983	38,2	10,6	38,2	87,0
1987	34,5	9,8	37,0	81,3
1990	36,7	9,1	33,5	79,3
1994	34,2	7,3	36,4	77,9
1998	28,4	6,7	40,9	76,0
2002	29,5	9,0	38,5	77,0
2005	27,8	7,4	34,2	<b>69,4</b>

- One of the side-effects of this trend is the fact that the electoral interchange function between the two major parties doesn't work any longer. The SPD doesn't get the votes which the CDU lose and the other way round. Instead smaller and new parties benefit from the electoral decline of the mainstream parties.
- Grand coalitions seem to foster this tendency. This is not only true for the German party system. The latest outcome of the national election in Austria, for example, offers some striking evidence for this thesis.
- We can observe a general tendency among the electorate to mistrust the established parties. There is a strong wish for fresh parties which are not affected by the old party system. This trend started already in the 1990ties in the city states of Hamburg and Bremen, when two local associations (Statt-Party and Labour for Bremen) successfully entered the parliament, was then succeeded by the eruptive gains of the Schill-Party in 2001, and is now continued by the Free Voter Association in Bavaria.
- This trend can be underlined when we include the results for parties that don't pass the 5 per cent threshold but gain, nevertheless, altogether remarkable and rising results.

Latest Election Results for Smallest Parties

Bavaria	2008	10,4 %
Hamburg	2008	7,3 %
Hesse	2008	4,8 %
Lower Saxony	2008	6,0 %

- The municipal level, although less important is another interesting indicator for this trend as the following figures with a selection of election results in a couple of cities demonstrate:

### Selected Results of some municipal Elections in 2007/2008

Bremerhaven 2007	<b>SPD = 33,6</b>	<b>CDU = 23,7</b>	Grüne = 12,6	FDP = 9,6	LINKE = 6,1	DVU = 5,5	<b>Bürger in Wut = 5,4</b>
Flensburg 2008	<b>SPD = 15,9</b>	<b>CDU = 20,5</b>	Grüne = 7,3	FDP = 4,6	LINKE = 7,3	<b>SSW= 22,0</b>	<b>Wir in Flensburg = 22,3</b>
Lübeck 2008	<b>SPD = 28,8</b>	<b>CDU = 25,5</b>	Grüne = 11,5	FDP = 8,4	LINKE = 11,7		<b>Bürger für Lübeck= 11,3</b>

- The rising mistrust in the established parties strengthens also the wish for new forms of representation and for the introduction of more elements of direct democracy. One of the key words in this context is presidentialisation. Polls about the popularity of politicians always place Bundespräsident Horst Köhler on the top position. People trust more in persons than in parties – this message might be the most remarkable element of the often discussed Americanization of the German party system.
- The voter turnout in general is decreasing although new parties and associations participate in elections. That means a rising number of people is not at all interested in elections and party competition.
- Since the 1990ties the volatility of voting behaviour is growing and produces amazing elevator effects with rapid changes in the electoral performance of parties:

#### “Elevator Effects” in Elections since the 1990ties

Bremen 1991	SPD	- 14 %
Sachsen-Anhalt 1998	CDU	- 12 %
Sachsen-Anhalt 1998	DVU	+ 13 %
Sachsen-Anhalt 2002	SPD	- 16 %
Berlin 2001	CDU	- 17 %
Hamburg 2001	Schill Partei	+ 19 %
Niedersachsen 2004	SPD	- 14,5 %
Sachsen 2004	CDU	- 13 %
Sachsen 2004	NPD	+ 9 %
Saarland 2004	SPD	- 14 %
Bayern 2008	CSU	- 17 %

9. All these features contributed to the current shape of the German party system which evolved over the last years. I want to point out, however, that the term five-party-system, which is often used to characterize the new developments is to a certain extent misleading and not precise. Although the trend points to a five-party-system the term “fluid multi-party-system” (Oskar Niedermayer coined the term “fluides Fünfparteiensystem”) applies much better to the current situation, because the configuration on the Länder level is still varying, and the sample of five parties is not always the same.

Current Configuration of the Party System on the Länder Level

<b>Bundesland</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	Government
Rheinland-Pfalz	CDU	SPD	FDP				SPD
Saarland	CDU	SPD	Grüne				CDU
Thüringen	CDU	SPD	LINKE				CDU
Baden-Würt.	CDU	SPD	Grüne	FDP			CDU-FPD
Hamburg	CDU	SPD	Grüne	LINKE			CDU-Grüne
Brandenburg	CDU	SPD	LINKE	DVU			SPD-CDU
Nordrhein-W.	CDU	SPD	Grüne	FDP			CDU-FPD
Sachsen-Anhalt	CDU	SPD	FDP	LINKE			CDU-SPD
Schleswig-Hols.	CDU	SPD	Grüne	FDP			CDU-SPD
<b>Berlin</b>	<b>CDU</b>	<b>SPD</b>	<b>Grüne</b>	<b>FDP</b>	<b>LINKE</b>		SPD-LINKE
<b>Bremen</b>	<b>CDU</b>	<b>SPD</b>	<b>Grüne</b>	<b>FDP</b>	<b>LINKE</b>		SPD-Grüne
<b>Hessen</b>	<b>CDU</b>	<b>SPD</b>	<b>Grüne</b>	<b>FDP</b>	<b>LINKE</b>		CDU geschäftsf.
<b>Niedersachsen</b>	<b>CDU</b>	<b>SPD</b>	<b>Grüne</b>	<b>FDP</b>	<b>LINKE</b>		CDU
Bayern	CSU	SPD	Grüne	FDP	Freie W.		?
Mecklenburg-V..	CDU	SPD	FDP	LINKE	NPD		SPD-CDU
Sachsen	CDU	SPD	Grüne	FDP	LINKE	NPD	CDU-SPD

10. We can also see that the classical minimum winning coalition of one major and one smaller party remains possible even in a five-party-system (Lower-Saxony, Bremen).. Bavaria will be the next case in this respect. I'm sure that the CSU and FPD will build a ruling coalition. But we can take for sure that the trend for establishing new coalition models will nevertheless continue. The black-green coalition in Hamburg is currently in the testing phase and has just to undergo a kind of acid test considering the dispute over the energy power plant in Moorburg inside of the Green party. In Hesse the SPD is determined to govern by minority rule together with the Greens and tolerated by the LEFT. Also coalitions of three parties are more likely in the future.

15. I conclude with some reflections on the strategic position of the parties with respect to their capability to form new coalitions. Interestingly the strategic position for coalition building is contrary to the current support of the parties in the polls. This is as well true for the mainstream parties as for the smaller parties. The SPD is in a much better position because she experienced already coalitions with all other parties that are represented in the Bundestag. The CDU, on the other hand, depends almost completely on the FDP if she doesn't want to build a grand coalition again. Among the smaller parties the Left has got only two options although its performance in the polls is pretty good in the moment.

Strategic Position of Parties for Coalition Building

	<b>SPD</b>	<b>CDU</b>	<b>FDP</b>	<b>Grüne</b>	<b>LINKE</b>
<b>SPD</b>		X	X	X	X
<b>CDU</b>	X		X	X?	
<b>FDP</b>	X	X		X?	
<b>Grüne</b>	X	X?	X?		X
<b>LINKE</b>	X			X	

16. Strategic options for new coalition should, however, not be confused with coalition probabilities. The problem is that the differentiation of the party system fosters on the one hand a certain tendency for the erosion of the classical political camps (particularly among the party elites) but on the other hand the political camps continue to exist among the members and voters. This is particularly true for many members and voters of the CDU, the FDP and the Greens. The question how voters evaluate coalitions between these parties always experiences the lowest support in the polls. Parties which change the political camp or coalition have to pay a price – either by losing voters or by offering the other side dearly presents. This sets limits to new models of coalition building. The FPD, for example, made appropriate experiences with the change of coalitions in 1969 and 1982 and nearly break off at that time. We have also to take into consideration that coalitions of three or even four parties (like in a Jamaica-coalition on the national level) in which each of the coalition partners wants to maintain its specific profile, require to a high degree a very intensive and careful coalition and crisis management which depends in the first place on the capability of the top politicians to work together in such coalitions. However the parties will manage to cope with the new challengers and to adapt their strategies to new formats of coalition building, one thing seems to be clear after the outcome of the Bavarian elections: the time for one-party-governments is over in Germany.