



Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Conference Paper

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Populism and/or democracy? A double pressure on catch-all parties

My aim is to focus on two possible dangers for liberal democracies: # 1 is the erosion of the integration power of *Volksparteien* (or catch-all parties) through populist movements, # 2 is the stress on the party systems as we knew them (or never knew them...) through the combined effects of the economic crisis and the adaptation to the consequences of climate change, scarcity of energy supply and environmental problems. The way out is either the greening of our political systems and cultures (highly improbable particularly in Eastern Europe) or the momentum for right-wing and left wing populist protest (probable not only in Eastern Europe).

1.

Let me start with the strange role of big parties *aka* *volksparteien aka* catch-all parties after WW II in Western democracies. The term refers to Otto Kirchheimer, a Jewish Socialist, lawyer and sociologist, close first to Carl Schmitt and after 1933 to the Frankfurt school who emigrated to the U.S. and became an observer of political parties on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1965 he predicted that catch-all parties similar to the Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. would also start forming in Western Europe where class structure and ideology once dominated the party systems. Now, Kirchheimer argued, parties would become voting machines bereft of any ideology in which ordinary party members no longer had a say. Instead professional politicians who took turns managing the state set the tone, and there was no opposition to speak of.

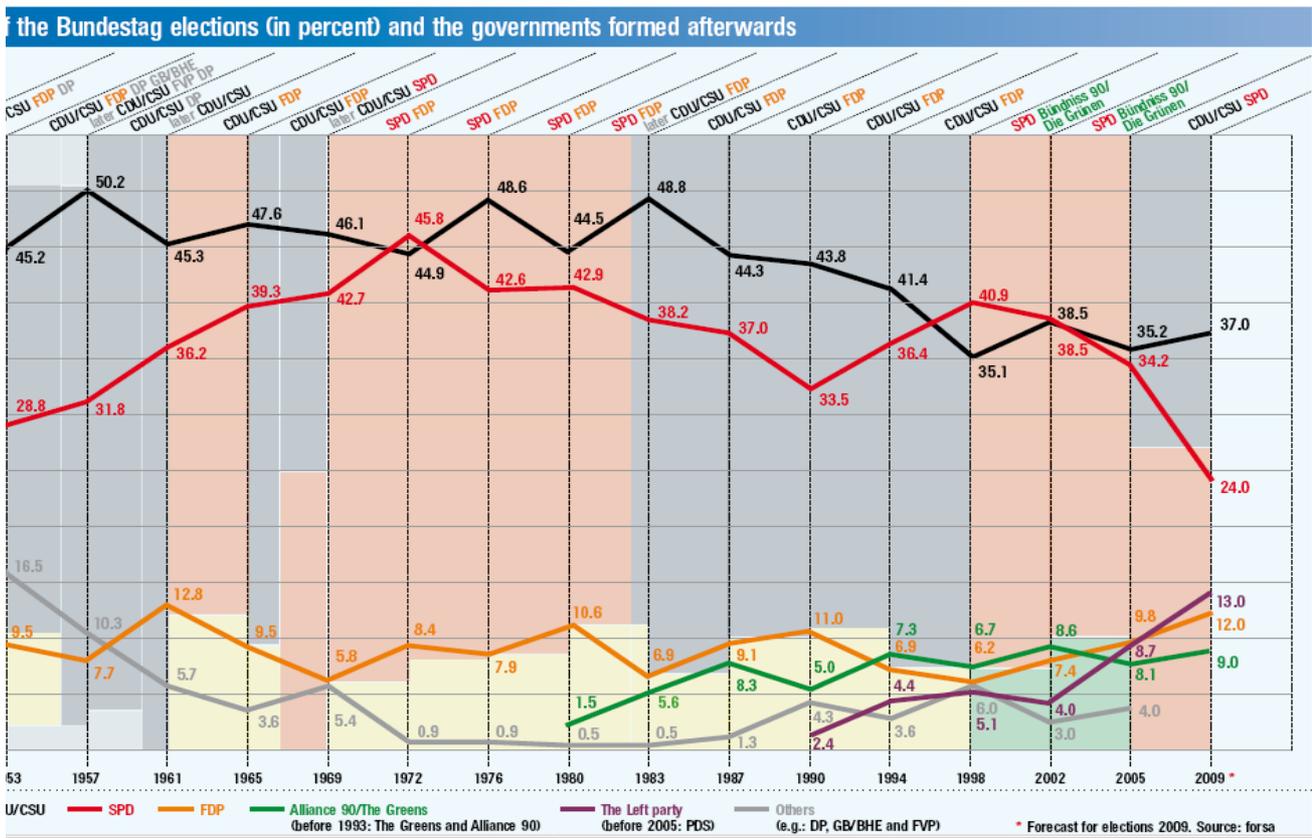
While Kirchheimer’s essay was being debated in Germany at the end of the 1960s, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats were forming a grand coalition. Some lawmakers from the two major parties contemplated introducing a majority voting system, which would, in turn, promote a two-party system. Many voters saw a political cartel of Christian and Social Democrats looming on the horizon that could only be actively countered by an extra-parliamentary opposition. According to critics, because both mainstream parties would compete against each other, their agendas would slowly but surely meet in the middle. The Christian and Social Democrats in Germany would therefore become centrist parties appealing to all classes and religions, employing simple slogans to compete for the same voters.

If that prediction had entirely come to pass, Germany’s political landscape today would not include the pro-business Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens or The Left party. But Kirchheimer was not completely wrong: The differences between the large parties have steadily diminished since the 1950s. The Red/Green policies of Germany’s ruling coalition from 1998 until 2005 could have easily been made by a Christian Democratic chancellor. In fact, a conservative chancellor – Angela Merkel – is now continuing those policies. Kirchheimer was also right in predicting the parties would lose increasingly more members and lose sight of their nominal goal of determining social currents in an effort to fill political and administrative posts.

The Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. were the prototype catch-all parties. By the middle of the 1960s, they no longer had any major policy differences, and those differences have become even vaguer since. Today, some U.S. citizens compare being asked to choose between the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey to taking the advertising taste test between Coke and Pepsi. But the traditional lines of social dissonance and conflict were not entirely smoothed over in either the U.S. or Western Europe. In the late 1960s, international conflicts, social tensions and cultural differences opened a new ideological divide. In the United States, a culture war broke out between Republicans and Democrats that is still going on today.

In Europe, political scientists spoke less about catch-all parties and more about “mass integration” or “people’s parties.” A typical example of a European people’s party is Germany’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Both Angela Merkel, the current leader, and Helmut Kohl, who dominated the party for two decades, like to refer to the CDU as “the great people’s party of the center.” The Christian Democrats regularly gained the support of more than 30 percent of voters from different social classes who were only loosely linked within the party.

At the same time, the Christian Democrats remained just as anchored in their traditional voter base as the Social Democrats, who also strove to become a people’s party. Together, the two people’s parties, allied with their respective interest groups, were able at times to garner more than 90 percent of the electorate. Center-right stood for a flourishing economy; center-left for social justice – and the two camps divided the electoral pie between them.



Those days are long gone. The process of concentration Kirchheimer identified as a danger to democracy has come to an end in Germany and Austria. Party systems are now fragmenting everywhere. Smaller parties – old and new – have a better chance of making it into parliament. In countries with proportional representation that makes it harder for big parties to capture a two-thirds majority or even half of the seats in parliament and in turn making it more difficult to form majorities and governments. The consequences are unpopular grand coalitions that make the fringes even stronger or difficult alliances of parties from very different political camps. These can even solidify into pseudo-parties such as Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia or Nicolas Sarkozy’s UMP.

Worldview parties based on religion or social class are back but they have expanded from their core voter base and are even becoming mini people’s parties in their own right, like The Left party, which grew out of the former Communist Party in eastern Germany. The real challenge for the mainstream parties is populist alliances on the right and the left, which are also people’s parties in their own special way.

Most populist parties stake their claim on the assertion that they are the sole representative of the people against the establishment. They open a front between the political elite and average people, whose differences in income, education, origin, gender and age are papered over with rhetoric. Both Eastern and Western Europe are experiencing what social scientist Ivan Krastev calls a populist moment. Leftwing populists are mobilizing against the rich and rightwing populists against foreigners. Both are united in their claim that the political establishment of the erstwhile people’s parties is arrogant and aloof.

The internal contradiction of the populist parties is that they rail against the establishment, while at the same time calling for an often-authoritarian style of political leadership. That in turn reflects the recent development of the nation state. It is losing power on the one hand, while on the other it is being called upon to confront and stop global dangers like climate change, terrorism and now the financial crisis. It may be that this blurring of roles will give rise to new prospects for the old catch-all parties.

2.

Let me now focus on the strategies of Western democracies and liberal parties concerning the "third industrial revolution". The formula is based on an intelligent combination of technical innovation and political control -- the witty advertising slogan could be: "The solar panel on the roof, the electric car in the garage -- and take the subsidies", suggesting a win-win situation above all for countries in the north. But the deal will not be pulled off quite so smoothly: a combination of rising energy costs, the eco-social consequences of climate change, and intergenerational injustice is putting increasing pressure on democratic consent and hence posing significant challenges to the self-understanding and legitimacy of the state. If we are to avoid the collateral damage of the climate and energy problem, we must think about a third industrial revolution in less instrumental terms than the first and the second. Climate change means cultural change -- and hence a change in political culture.

It is time to think about how to prepare democratic society for the significant stress that adjusting to climate change will cause, and how to guarantee political participation in a difficult period. German citizens are already beginning to doubt that they live in the best of all political worlds. According to a study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, almost one in three people hold the view that democracy is functioning badly; astoundingly, 60 per cent of eastern Germans were of this opinion. There is a growing impression that the political system is not equipped to deal with the "big issues" such as climate change, global justice, and demographic development. In other words, democracy is no longer "delivering" and is lacking an essential pillar of its credibility: output legitimacy. A quarter of all respondents no longer want nothing more to do with "democracy as it is here". Declining voter turnout and atrophy in membership of political parties and other large organizations (despite the population increase after re-unification) show that these are not precise representations of the public mood but rather snapshots of a trend.¹

Blame for the growing dissatisfaction with democracy lies with the usual suspects -- the long-term unemployed, Hartz-IV (unemployment benefits -- ed.) recipients and the poorly qualified; among these groups, the survey results are particularly catastrophic. But globalization and rising energy costs are also dragging the middle classes into a perceived downwards spiral, and doubts about the system's ability to

¹ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (ed.), "Persönliche Lebensumstände, Einstellungen zu Reformen, Potenziale der Demokratieentfremdung und Wahlverhalten", 2008.

function are hence making themselves felt in the centre of society as well. In some surveys, up to 90 per cent of Germans believe that the democratic parties are simply incapable of solving difficult problems, and almost all believe that elites are primarily interested in their own wellbeing.²

Broadly speaking, five "problem groups" can be identified:

- eastern Germans, who are impressionable to both left- and rightwing nationalist populism (observable throughout eastern central Europe);
- native "subclasses" or "marginalized" groups, in which anomie phenomena can be observed;
- young male immigrants suffering the effects of poor education and discrimination;
- Islamist Muslims opting for a radical critique of western modernity, who see democracy as a form of dominance and a lifestyle;
- sections of the management strata who have rejected democracy and the state.³

Labour market problems, which for security-oriented central Europeans are a source of sustained unease, combined with the energy crisis and the already perceptible consequences of climate change, are causing anxieties about the future to increase. Simultaneously, trust is evaporating in those formerly credited with the ability to solve problems -- the (party) political elites. Declining trust in democracy is not only demonstrated by a rise in authoritarian tendencies, it is also mirrored in the inability of political elites to address problems related to the future credibly and to deal with them convincingly. For that reason, the erosion of democracy must be taken seriously: it reflects on one hand the fears of those who perceive themselves as the losers of modernization, and on the other, the realistic judgement that the political classes do not know how to continue either.

Democracy also seems to be under pressure if one looks outwards at the developing countries, where one cannot but note that the model of western democracy is considered unattractive. Nourished by the initial success of the "fourth wave of democratization" after 1989, the modernization theory complacently assumed that political liberalization would inevitably follow in the footsteps of economic liberalization -- that whoever said yes to capitalism would take on board democracy as well. Thus, hopes were raised that sooner or later the world would become one big West. Obviously, the Chinese government is of another opinion, as is the Russian: capitalism not only works without democracy, it even works quicker. The laborious and protracted processes of canvassing and decision-making, the drafts, the sessions, the

² Wilhelm Heitmeyer (ed.), *Deutsche Zustände*, Folge 6. Frankfurt/M 2007.

³ Heinz Bude, *Die Ausgeschlossenen. Das Ende vom Traum einer gerechten Gesellschaft*, Hamburg 2008.

public statements, and the polling -- all these time-consuming procedures are done away with in autocracies: one can simply go ahead and modernize. Where in western democracies it takes years just to decide to build a wind farm, a central committee plants a fossil-fuel power station in the countryside every other week.

Evidently, abandoning democracy accelerates modernization rather than put the brake on development. Anyone who observes how subtly the Chinese government works to stabilize trust in the system by reducing hardships and distributing gratifications cannot be so sure that this system will fail just because it is undemocratic. It is even possible that this "successful model" motivates technocratic illusions in the West as well.⁴

This alarming development reflects the fact that economic globalization has already led to significant tectonic shifts in world society. The early industrial nations are steadily drifting from the centre of the global dynamic of transformation and in some cases are already spectators of a game in which they continue to believe they are the main players. However a relative power surge in one part of the world is equivalent to a relative power loss in another. With the absolute certainty about the effectiveness of the western model, this potentially fatal equation has long been ignored, especially after the apparent victory of the West over the East in 1989.

With the decline of the West's model character, democracy also came under pressure externally. Other routes into modernity emerged, and on current evidence will continue to be successful until ecological problems upset the new variety of turbo-capitalism. The expiry of western models of democracy in the global perspective is therefore connected to the loss of confidence in democracy in the West: the losers of globalization in western nations are the first to sense that trust in the welfare pledges of the nation-state is unfounded. For a long time now, a skilled laborer no longer competes on the local job market but rather -- as he perceives it -- in a snake pit without delineation or exit route. Rapid social relegation -- getting left by the wayside in what used to be the land of the economic miracle -- becomes the biographical worst case scenario hovering over one's head.

It is not hard to understand that those affected by such situations feel themselves abandoned by the state, and often from democracy as well. One of the main reasons is precisely that the state has not ceased to profess willingness to provide care that in reality it can no longer afford. Thus, for example, the increasingly loud demands that low and middle income groups receive compensation for dramatically rising energy costs are likely to be disappointed. No democracy in the world that can vouch for this if resources become scarcer and therefore more expensive; moreover, the paradox is that if democracies wish to retain trust, they must admit that they cannot do so. It is possible to imagine what will happen if rising energy costs result in a decline in living standards even for middle income groups, with low earners no longer able to heat their homes. In modern societies, private risks are stabilized by institutions. But what happens when public institutions such as political parties, trade unions, churches, and health and social care facilities can barely assume these functions? The history of the twentieth

⁴ Anthony Giddens, "The Politics of Climate Change: Some Remarks", ms., London 2008.

century demonstrates that trust in the stability of social conditions is principally unfounded -- things can very quickly get out of hand. History also shows that when people feel under pressure and threatened, they tend towards attitudes and decisions they previously never would have dreamed of.

In past decades, political elites have tried to establish trust with "more communication" and public relations. However, while communications media require ever more resources, the elites are increasingly incapable of communicating what they are doing and why they are doing it. The future of western democracy certainly does not lie in a return to the planned state that skillfully communicates its benedictions, but in the revitalization of participation and debate. Only then will citizens be able to play an instrumental part in the intelligent reversal of the consequences of industrialization, which otherwise will necessarily strike them as imposed austerity. It will only be possible to set plausible targets such as "resource efficiency" if those affected participate and are involved in putting rational climate policies into practice. On the other hand, if the state merely suggests a willingness to provide care (that it cannot remotely afford), it undermines the basis of the democratic. With a shrug of the shoulders, it rejects the engagement of those without whom the necessary reorganization of contemporary lifestyle cannot be realized.

The surveys quoted should therefore serve as an occasion to consider how to modernize not only political technologies, but also democratic institutions. Integration means participation, not provision, and -- however unfashionable this might be -- must be strengthened by "more democracy", in other words innovative forms of direct participation. In order to prevent structurally large groups feeling excluded or "dumped", the experience must again be conveyed that political participation can mean genuine *effectiveness*. In many cases, voter apathy is less a cognitive problem -- a problem of knowledge that one can counter with "classical" political education -- than a reaction to experiences of disappointment or frustration on the part of citizens who are thoroughly willing to participate and who have at their disposal sufficient knowledge about political institutions to do so. What is lacking is "know-how" about the practical-instrumental democratic skills required to put ideas and interests into practice. What has gone astray is the sheer ability to articulate one's own experiences effectively and to assert these in political debate. "Politics" has become an opaque social space.

In the context of climate change, this process is indeed revolutionary;⁵ it is all about communicating and exercising concrete and practical know-how about the functioning of the (local) political system. In a so-called "media democracy", popular rule finds its form in the media, and above all the visual media.

Politics competes in vain with other more entertaining and appealing media products and formats. This is proved by the unsightly stereotypes offered above all by political reporting, for example the caricatured "shake hands" or "catwalks" that are supposed to provide visual padding for information. Even more problematic is the suggestion of active participation through mere spectatorship -- rarely has the public known more than it does today, yet it is glued to the sofa. "Perceived" participation is at any rate far

⁵ Claus Leggewie/Harald Welzer/Ludger Heidbrink, "KlimaKultur", in: Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden (ed), 2° *Das Wetter, der Mensch und sein Klima*, Göttingen 2008.

stronger than actual participation, and this imbalance is in turn supported by the impression politicians' public appearances make that they are the sole bearers' responsibility. In acute or long-term issues, this causes a growing disillusion with politics, whose responsibility is in reality diminishing, above all at the national level. Here, telegenic leftwing and above all rightwing populists present themselves as "a force that stands outside the closed world of the political elites that speaks *for* and *with* people that can give identity to the formless mass at the centre of modern societies".⁶

In the search for actors that possess or could acquire democratic skills, the gaze falls less and less upon professional politics. Some see the chance for the revival of social participation in active consumer responsibility; consumer rights lends itself well to learning democratic skills through apparently trivial questions such as: "What can I do so that our school is supplied by the local organic dairy?"⁷ According to this approach, analogous issues of climate and environmental protection open up new opportunities for political engagement that connect local and regional agendas with global ones.

When considering how to deal with the consequences of climate change, questions of democratic participation must finally be discovered and taken seriously. The development of innovative policies regarding taxes and subsidies, as well as research and infrastructure demands for the inclusion of citizens as active stakeholders of the political community. Only if they are taken serious as members of *their own* societies changes in lifestyle and behavioural patterns can be seriously considered and realized.

⁶ Colin Crouch, *Postdemokratie*, Frankfurt/Main 2008. English original Oxford 2004.

⁷ Tanja Busse, *Die Einkaufsrevolution. Konsumenten entdecken ihre Macht*, München 2006.