

CONCLUSION



Their decisive victory in the 1957 Bundestag election catapulted Adenauer and the CDU/CSU to the zenith of their power. Neither before nor since has a single party in the Federal Republic of Germany achieved a majority of the vote. Yet, almost immediately after their greatest triumph, Adenauer and his party began experiencing a slow decline. Adenauer's failed bid for West Germany's presidency in late spring 1959, undermined in part by his reluctance to allow Erhard to succeed him in the chancellorship, underscored the growing divisions within the CDU/CSU. The party had grown overly dependent upon Adenauer, who was now weakening politically, as both a focal point in election campaigns and as leader within the party. The autumn 1962 *Der Spiegel* affair, in which Adenauer had the members of the magazine's editorial staff arrested after they published an article critical of the government's defense policy, spelled the beginning of the end for Adenauer. Ludwig Erhard, assuming Adenauer's mantle in 1963, was charismatic and popular as the so-called father of the economic miracle, but he did not possess Adenauer's aura of authority and political ability to maintain discipline within his party and the parliamentary system. His chancellorship lasted until only 1966—to be replaced by something unthinkable during the Adenauer era, a grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and SPD that lasted until 1969. Adding to the party's problems, the consolidation of the West German political system during the 1960s did not exclusively favor the CDU/CSU. By 1961, the SPD had altered its campaigning and platform strategies, succeeded in picking up votes from the smaller parties, and begun to gain on the CDU/CSU—resulting in Willy Brandt's ascendancy to the chancellorship in 1969.¹

After its crushing 1957 electoral defeat, the SPD hastened the pace of its often painful reform. Following the election, the party leadership came under sharp

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attack from local party leaders. Within the next few years much of the older leadership was voted down in favor of younger, charismatic, and more regionally based politicians who were not beholden to the party apparatus and sought to reform the party—including Willy Brandt, Fritz Erler, Helmut Schmidt, and Herbert Wehner. At the 1958 party congress in Stuttgart, several representatives of the party's old guard were not reelected to the executive board, signaling some of the larger changes that were in the offing.

On 13 November 1959 a special party congress was convened in the Bonn suburb of Bad Godesberg to adopt the SPD's new basic program. Perhaps most striking about the program statement was what it did not contain, most notably any mention of Marx or a hard and fast ideological commitment. The section discussing economics made no mention of socialization, although it included some reference to "public ownership" as "appropriate and necessary" when "sound economic power relations cannot be guaranteed by other means." The Bad Godesberg Program accepted many basic elements of the free market, including free competition, consumer choice, and free initiative on the part of entrepreneurs. Overall, the document signified the SPD's retreat from ideological battle with the bourgeois parties; now it advocated a more just and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth instead of class conflict. Most importantly perhaps, the Bad Godesberg Program altered the public image of the SPD and helped transform the party into a *Volkspartei* (catch-all party).² Clearly, the program reacted to an ongoing shift in public opinion toward the free market. One July 1960 survey indicated that 61 percent of respondents favored the free market over some form of socialization (7 percent) or combination of the two systems (8 percent).³ The SPD's niche "sub-culture" of primarily working-class constituents began dissolving, and in the 1960s the party succeeded in attracting support from a broader range of West German society, particularly from members of the middle class.

The combined growth of the CDU/CSU and the SPD in the 1950s and 1960s signaled the emergence of the party system that would dominate the Federal Republic until the growth of the Green Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In this system, the parties of the middle, consisting of the CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP, controlled the political landscape as the extremist and splinter parties disappeared.⁴ This volume has shown that the CDU/CSU was successful in constructing and selling a political meaning of the economic miracle and the social market economy over the course of the 1950s. Utilizing economics as a major issue, the party formed and projected a party image that effectively attracted votes from varied sociological groups within West Germany. As a consequence, the CDU/CSU became the Federal Republic's first "catch-all" party, crossing cultural, regional, and class lines. The creation of a party that broke down Weimar voting patterns—an approach copied by the SPD in the 1960s—was crucial to the development of West Germany's political party system. The construction of broader "catch-all" parties proved to be a crucial difference between Weimar's unstable party system and the stable democracy of the Federal Republic of Germany.

This more stable party system, anchored by broad-based parties, was in no small part the product of the adoption and implementation of American political campaigning styles, advertising techniques, and public opinion polling. Throughout the 1950s, the SPD consistently fared better in *Land* (state) elections than at the national level. The SPD's large membership played an important role in this success, as the party could mobilize its faithful to go to the polls in *Land* elections, where turnout tended to be lower than in federal elections. In contrast, the CDU/CSU achieved relatively more success on the national stage than in *Land* elections. With its new propaganda techniques, the CDU/CSU was able to construct and sell the image of its political products, namely Adenauer, Erhard, and the economic miracle, to specific sociological groups within the Federal Republic and draw these groups to the polls, thereby maximizing the party's success at the ballot box. In conjunction with the utilization of these new techniques, there emerged an orchestrated network of pro-Adenauer and pro-government propaganda organizations that helped produce a coherent conservative message. While adopting the most up-to-date advertising and polling techniques available, the CDU/CSU eschewed issuing merely dogmatic, ideological program statements that appealed to the party's most faithful members and a narrow segment of society. Rather, the CDU/CSU carefully modified and directed its appeals to key groups of swing voters—especially women and less religious voters. Without their support, Adenauer's goal of molding the CDU/CSU into a true *Volkspartei* would not have been achieved. With their emphasis upon the creation and transmission of an appealing party image, West German election campaigns revolved less and less around ideological conflict. In many respects, this change constituted a "consumerization" of West German politics during the 1950s as politics and parties were increasingly viewed as products to be sold to consumers whose tastes were carefully researched.

By minimizing cultural and religious issues in the 1950s campaign and espousing a clear conception of a West German society increasingly based upon rising consumerism and materialism, the CDU/CSU's campaigning appeared, on the surface, less ideological, particularly in comparison to the 1949 campaign. During the 1950s campaigns, the party no longer pushed an ideological conception of a morally and physically reconstructed Christian community, as it had done in 1949. Instead, the party offered a harmonious vision of West German society that appeared to be above class party politics and promised to supplant older cultural, regional, and class conflicts that had traditionally beset German politics. Consumerism was portrayed not only as satisfying individualistic desires but also as representing the very legitimacy of this new state. However, the selling of the economic miracle possessed an underlying ideological component that lent considerable political power to conservative forces in West Germany. A mythological narrative of a materially abundant West Germany allowed Adenauer, Erhard, and the CDU/CSU to claim that they were creating something new without pushing the electorate to confront Germany's recent past. The beginning of their story was not the Nazi era, but rather the aftermath of war, the destruction and despair of

the immediate postwar years, and the miraculous rebirth engendered by the legendary 1948 currency reform. The vision of a “phoenix rising out of the ashes” and the ensuing prosperity did not generate uncomfortable memories or doubts regarding who the West Germans were or what their nation was built upon—sentiments election campaigners would in no way want to evoke. Instead, this positive vision encouraged West Germans to silence painful and discomfiting memories of the Third Reich and the immediate postwar years while also helping them to create new memories of economic reconstruction for concrete political purposes. In the process of glorifying the economic miracle, conservative propaganda efforts refashioned the concept of consumerism from something previously seen as alien and un-German into a fundamental aspect of the West German sense of nationhood.

Inherent in Adenauer’s and the CDU/CSU’s political messages were conceptions of how the West German democracy was to work and how its society should be organized. “Adenauer and his team” were to watch paternalistically over the West German electorate, while, implicitly, the electorate should passively enjoy the physical and mental security of the chancellor’s leadership and the material comforts of consumerism. In many respects, Adenauer’s vision jibed well with the views of the party’s main pollster, Elisabeth Noelle Neumann, regarding the appropriate role that polling should play in a democracy. It constituted a tool to help leaders monitor, control, and dampen the dangerous impulses of the masses. The party’s propaganda reinforced this passive conception of politics and social harmony. Despite the change in ideological underpinnings—from Christian anti-materialism based upon the social market economy to the embrace of individualistic consumerism—the party’s conceptions of men and women assuming prescribed roles as female consumers and male producers within a well-ordered, tranquil society remained constant throughout the 1950s. The same could be said of Die Waage’s conception of a harmonious relationship between employees and employers that created and distributed the fruits of the social market economy.

During these years, Die Waage and the CDU/CSU successfully sold this vision of economic and social reconstruction to an electorate exhausted and alienated by the upheaval of a repressive regime, total war, and utter defeat. Economic propaganda not only molded the West Germans’ conceptions of themselves and their society, but also was crucial in the construction of a passive, if not stable, democracy that was based in consensus where, apart from duly casting votes, economic productivity and consumer choice were the paramount obligations of civic participation. Many studies from the late 1950s and early 1960s demonstrated all too well that West German citizens were more than willing to take on a passive role in their new republic.⁵ Clearly it would take the social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s to generate a citizenship that more actively engaged in the political process and fully embraced individual civil liberties.⁶

In light of Germany’s Nazi past, Adenauer and the CDU/CSU’s top-down, somewhat authoritarian view of a controlled, submissive electorate is clearly troubling, but in some important respects their vision did help establish the structures

of the Federal Republic's democracy. Diethelm Prowe has argued that the real "miracle" of the 1950s was not economic, but instead political—especially in light of West Germany's establishment of a democratic society within a generation after the war. He identified the conservative Adenauer-Erhard era as laying the foundation of a democratic West Germany, despite the claims of the "New Left" of the 1968 generation that West Germany did not experience a revolutionary period immediately following the war that transformed its society and institutions. Prowe suggested that the synthesis between the influence of Americanization and the conservatives' reintegration into West German society helped create a new stable environment that allowed this democratic society to take root and grow. American economic and diplomatic policies, such as military protection against communism and Marshall Plan aid, fostered security, economic growth, and social stability, while simultaneously American demands for democratization curtailed the resurgence of more strident and dangerous authoritarian traditions in West Germany. This synthesis of Americanization and conservative reintegration, Prowe argued, allowed West Germans "to distance themselves from their past without facing questions over the culpability of traditional German society for the Nazi crimes. They could don the dress of Western democratic institutions and American-style free enterprise without disturbing familiar German social structures. Germans could take ownership of democracy without the memory of an antidemocratic past when Germanness had been defined in opposition to Western Enlightenment individualism."⁷

As this work has shown, the Americanization of West Germany manifested itself not only in formal political and economic relations and the importation of American mass culture. In addition, its influence revealed itself in very subtle ways, many times beyond the conscious purview of the West German public. The introduction of an American conception of electoral politics played a vital role in the conservative creation of a democratic West Germany. Confronted with new political conditions, conservative forces quickly adapted themselves to a campaigning style that was increasingly focused on the opinions and attitudes of the electorate in order to construct a broad-based anti-Marxist party. The American influence in politics did not necessarily completely clear away the debris of older German political attitudes and practices, although it undoubtedly helped transform Weimar traditions into a more viable political system. Instead, the importation of American campaigning techniques blended with older German practices during the 1950s to produce a uniquely West German, democratic political culture that both looked to the past and searched overseas for its models.

In postwar democracies public opinion and modern political advertising proved to be effective means for sounding out the electorate and projecting the image of a political party that adopted these techniques. The CDU/CSU was the party most successful in adopting polling and advertising efficiencies, allowing its campaigns to target specific segments of the electorate. But fundamentally, the party had to possess a product to sell. In West Germany, as in the United States, the most successful campaign tactic was to sell a figure who personified a party's

image rather than a party platform or program. In the marketplace of political personalities, the CDU/CSU possessed two powerful products in Adenauer and Erhard, figures who by the second half of the 1950s had come to represent stability and economic prosperity to the West German electorate. Until the 1961 campaign, the SPD possessed no such political assets. It would take the SPD a decade to realize its situation, abandon its commitment to a rigid party program, and craft a product of such quality in the form of Willy Brandt. Only then would the real challenge to Bonn's political stability be posed and successfully met—namely, the peaceful transfer of power.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Pridham, *Christian Democracy in Western Germany*, 113–187.
2. Susanne Miller and Heinrich Potthoff, *A History of German Social Democracy: From 1848 to the Present* (New York, 1983), 176–177; and Nicholls, *Freedom with Responsibility*, 366–367.
3. Hans Wellman, “Die Soziale Marktwirtschaft im Spiegel vom Meinungsfragen (Ph.D. diss., University of Cologne, 1962), 91–94.
4. For a discussion of the West German political party system, see Partch, “The Transformation of the West German Party System: Patterns of Electoral Change and Consistency,” 85–120.
5. See Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*; and Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*.
6. See David P. Conradt, “From Output Orientation to Regime Support: Changing German Political Culture,” in Ursula Hoffmann-Lange, ed., *Social and Political Structures in West Germany: From Authoritarianism to Postindustrial Democracy* (Boulder, 1991), 127–142.
7. Diethelm Prowe, “The ‘Miracle’ of the Political-Culture Shift: Democratization between Americanization and Conservative Reintegration,” 451–458.