

Elections to the Bundestag: make or break for the liberal party

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Many commentators viewed the FDP's defeat in the 2013 Bundestag elections, when the party failed to cross the 5% electoral threshold, as the end of the German liberal party. This view was further confirmed by another local election which the FDP lost, and by the dwindling number of party members. The FDP became a symbol of the maladies affecting German political life, and of politicians' faults: clientelism, opportunism, a lack of direction and greed. The party had been present in the Bundestag for 64 subsequent years, and had been a member of government coalitions for 45 years. It also served as the power base for two presidents of Germany, as well as for Hans-Dietrich Genscher, for many years Germany's foreign minister. However, during a period of just four years (2009–2013), when it co-ruled the country alongside the CDU/CSU, the FDP became unelectable.

Regardless of the fact that the party has no representation in the Bundestag and that many prominent activists have left its ranks, the FDP's new leader, Christian Lindner, has managed to regain the attention of the national media and radically change the party's image. Back in October 2014, the FDP had deputies in six local parliaments and was not a member of any coalition; at present, however, the FDP has representatives in nine out of 16 local parliaments and is a member of ruling coalitions in Rhineland-Palatinate, North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein. If the elections to the Bundestag had been held on Sunday, 27 August 2017, the party would have garnered around 8% of the votes. It could also have hoped to form a ruling coalition with the Christian Democrats. A political alliance with the SPD would be less likely. However, should the FDP lose approval in the final weeks of the campaign and fail to bring its representatives into parliament again, it will be extremely difficult for the party to survive for another four years.

The defeat of the dream coalition

The now 38-year-old Lindner became the party's leader in 2013. At that time, even some party members did not expect the FDP to survive. After four years in the ruling coalition alongside the CDU/CSU, the FDP was viewed by society as a party with no direction, one that only cared for the particular interests of its supporters' lobbies, and one that failed to deliver on its electoral promises. This assessment followed on from a turbulent four-year-long collaboration between the FDP and the Christian Democrats. Initially, the coalition of these two parties had been viewed as a recipe for success due to the similarity of their programmes. However, paradoxically, it turned out to be beset by conflicts. The liberals intended to immediately begin delivering on the promise contained in their electoral slogan

“More net than gross [income]”, which they understood as lowering taxes, reforming the income tax regime, reducing state subsidies, launching savings programmes to consolidate public finances and liberalising employment laws. However, they met with resistance from the German Chancellery. As a proponent of the policy of ‘small steps’, Chancellor Angela Merkel argued that no major reforms should be carried out without strong public support. Disputes emerged between the liberals and the Christian Democrats just a few weeks after the formation of the government, and the FDP’s approval ratings began to drop rapidly: from the figure of over 14% which it had garnered in the election (because it had positioned itself as a party of great competence in economic affairs, which was of major importance in the situation of a financial crisis), they fell to around 5%.

The conflicts between the coalition members, involving for example the energy transition programme, personal data protection, European policy, and the role of Erika Steinbach, the chairperson of the Federation of Expellees, in Germany’s foreign and domestic policy, lasted throughout the government’s term. There were situations in which the ruling parties made temporary alliances with the SPD and the Greens, the opposition parties in the Bundestag. For example, Chancellor Merkel was backed by the opposition during the Bundestag votes on aid packages for Greece and mechanisms to stabilise the euro^[1]. The FDP, for its part, voted alongside the Social Democrats and the Greens for the election of Joachim Gauck as Germany’s president, which Chancellor Merkel opposed.

The conflicts with the coalition parties (the CDU, and in particular the CSU), the failure to deliver on major electoral promises^[2], the unceasing support for key liberal policies in matters such as support for employee (the refusal to offer financial aid to thousands of individuals who lost their jobs as a result of the Schlecker drugstore chain going bankrupt, as well as those working at the Opel manufacturing plant in Bochum) all led to a permanent drop in the party’s approval rating, which in turn translated into a series of defeats in local elections.

As a consequence, a rash and rapid campaign was launched to bring to account those people who were guilty of these failures. Back in 2011, a group had formed within the party, led by Philipp Rösler, minister of health, and Christian Lindner, then the party’s secretary-general, which was in opposition to the party chief Vice-Chancellor Guido Westerwelle who, it should be noted had been behind the party’s historic success in the Bundestag elections. Rösler and Lindner received unofficial support from Hans-Dietrich Genscher. At the May 2011 party convention, Westerwelle was forced to abandon his plan to seek re-election as party chief. Later, he also resigned from the office of Vice-Chancellor and was replaced by Rösler, but retained the office of foreign minister. Despite these shifts, the voters remained unimpressed. The FDP continued to lose seats in subsequent local parliaments, and in the campaign preceding the 2013 Bundestag elections it backed Rainer Brüderle, a long-time FDP MP and a former minister of the economy, a jovial person who often committed gaffes. The chaotic FDP campaign^[3] and the emergence of the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which at that time strongly supported free market policies, resulted in the liberals winning just 4.8% of the votes in the elections held on 22 September 2013, and failing to cross the electoral threshold.

Lindner: ‘I am the party’

At the party convention in April 2017, Lindner argued that after four years a lot has changed in the FDP, including “its sound, outfit and centres of gravity” (*Sound, Auftreten, Schwerpunkte*). This is an apt summary of the results of his actions aimed at saving the party. In his efforts to reform the FDP, Lindner has placed the greatest emphasis on image: the party colours have been changed (magenta was added to yellow and blue), the activists began to appear in public meetings wearing not suits but t-shirts and trainers, and to use a hybrid, Anglicised language in both their speeches and on posters and electoral spots (*Beta Republik Deutschland, German Mut, Trial und Erfolg*)[4]. All this is intended to evoke the image of a dynamic, modern company, and to attract young voters working in creative and IT jobs. To make himself even more credible to this group, Lindner regularly compares his party to a start-up.

There has also been a perceptible change in the party representatives’ speaking style; it has become strongly confrontational and sarcastic towards their political opponents. Due to its selective criticism of some of the federal government’s actions (for example during the migration crisis), the FDP has succeeded in generating the perception of a party of reasonable protest, similar in some of its slogans to Alternative for Germany in the first months of its existence (i.e. when the AfD was winning voters disenchanted with the Christian Democrats’ attitude towards the eurozone crisis). These changes continued in 2015, precisely when the AfD experienced a leadership shift and began to lean towards the right. The liberals managed to win a portion of the AfD’s bourgeois electorate and bring in representatives to local parliaments in Bremen and Hamburg, and in 2016 to local parliaments in Baden-Wurtemberg and the Rheinland-Palatinate, where the FDP is a member of the ruling coalition. The party’s modified image was accompanied by major changes to its manifesto, which were intended to achieve two goals:

- breaking with the heritage of Guido Westerwelle and Hans-Dietrich Genscher (both of whom died in 2016) in foreign policy, and open up to certain controversial demands including expelling Greece from the eurozone and halting EU membership negotiations with Turkey;
- breaking with its reputation as a party that is detached from problems affecting the ‘common’ people and which depends on narrow interest groups.

The FDP’s present relatively high approval rating is mainly the result of its leader’s popularity. He has consistently built up his image by using methods more typical of the realm of show business rather than politics. Lindner is the most active German politician on social media (he writes his posts himself and engages in debates with citizens), he does not shun publicity, and is not afraid to reveal facts from his private life[5]. In this way he is creating his image as a politician who is close to the people, although by doing so he attracts the attention of not only major media, but also of the tabloids. He is always very well prepared for his broadcast appearances and combines a thorough knowledge of the subject matter with witty rhetoric.

The alternative to the Alternative

The present FDP manifesto is considerably different from the one the party presented in 2013. In drawing up the present party manifesto, Lindner has listened more closely to the

social mood and responded to the public's fears. And importantly, he has done so in a less radical manner than the AfD.

First and foremost, Lindner has abandoned the paradigm adopted by Genscher, according to which the party was a natural ally of the Christian Democrats. In its present incarnation, the FDP is a party that emphasises its independence and willingness to pursue its own ideas. In potential coalition negotiations (with either of the two bigger parties) Lindner will focus on four issues: education, taxes (and the economy more broadly), internal security and migration, and digitisation. In the field of education, the party demands greater coordination at federal level, so as to unify the quality of education offered across Germany; this is the centre of gravity of the FDP's electoral manifesto and Lindner's own idea. In addition, the FDP wants education spending from the federal budget to be raised, so that the quality of education in Germany "again reaches the global top level". The liberals are in favour of far-reaching tax relief in connection with the expected budgetary surplus (disputes are likely to arise over this issue with both the CDU/CSU and the SPD). In domestic security policy, the FDP objects to the further limitation of civil freedoms and demands that the number of police officers be increased (this is a common demand, also expressed by the Greens and the SPD, but it is not supported by the CDU/CSU). Alongside this, the FDP wants closer cooperation between states and data exchanges in combating international terrorism. According to Lindner, immigration is to serve Germany's interests: Germany is to compete with the USA and Great Britain in attracting talented individuals and enabling them to settle. This is a clear reference to the decision Chancellor Merkel made in 2015 when she ordered that borders be opened to all migrants. This slogan is aimed at supporters of both the AfD and the CDU/CSU, who want to limit immigration but do not want to be labelled as xenophobic. The FDP proposes that immigrants be legally committed to integrate, and supports the plan to limit the right to dual citizenship (to the third generation). The party sees itself as an "advocate of new opportunities resulting from digitisation", and highlights the need to increase the use of digital technologies not only in education but also in transport, the economy and the public sector. This is in line with the image of 'the party as start-up' which Lindner has attempted to build.

In European and international politics, the liberals demand that an EU foreign minister with real competences be appointed, and that a common European border guard and army be established. They demand that the issue of states such as Greece leaving the eurozone be regulated, that EU membership negotiations with Turkey be suspended, and sanctions against Russia upheld until President Putin abandons his aggressive policy towards Ukraine, or even stepped up should the conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalate. At the same time, however, in an interview on 5 August 2017, Lindner supported the view that the case of Crimea could be considered as a "lasting temporary measure". This was tantamount to refusing to recognise the annexation and conducting dialogue with Russia. Lindner compared the situation in Crimea to the realities of the years following the end of World War II, when Western Germany refused to recognise the Baltic states' annexation by the USSR. Lindner's surprisingly conciliatory statement towards Russia is an attempt to win the support of Germany's economic lobby and the pro-Russian supporters of other parties. It is also intended as a signal to the SPD that the liberals will not consider the war in Ukraine as a barrier to forming a potential coalition.

The potential problems and conflicts

Despite the changes introduced by Lindner, the party's situation ahead of the elections remains unstable. The main problem is the lack of personnel. Having gathered the most important institutional functions in the party into his own hands (the party leader, leader of the electoral campaign, head of the party organisation in North Rhine-Westphalia and head of the FDP faction in the local parliament), Lindner holds the power which has enabled him to build a new, consistent image for the party. However, aside from him, Wolfgang Kubicki (the head of the party organisation in Schleswig-Holstein) and Alexander Graf Lambsdorff (Vice President of the European Parliament) the party has no nationally recognisable politicians. Moreover, due to its four-year absence from the Bundestag, combined with an outflow of human capital to the business sector, Lindner has no power base of the experts and officials who would support him in coalition negotiations and in ruling the country. This is why his announcements regarding potentially joining the government coalition are cautious; joining the government at all costs is neither the ultimate goal nor an optimum scenario for the party. Lindner emphasises that he would agree for his party to become a member of the ruling coalition only if many of the FDP's manifesto demands are met. He has also avoided making statements regarding his coalition preferences before the elections. However, he admits that the manifestos of the CDU/CSU have most in common with that of the FDP.

Taking into account the parties' manifestos and their present approval ratings, three coalitions would be likely. The liberals would be present in two of them: CDU/CSU-FDP and CDU/CSU-FDP-Green. However, the latter contains an inbuilt conflict between the liberals and the Greens. Despite the fact that these parties are members of ruling coalitions in two federal states, they have divergent views on many matters, for example when it comes to climate protection. According to the FDP, the Greens' attitude is too ideological and could be harmful to the economy. The new government in North Rhine-Westphalia (CDU-FDP) has been critical of the policy pursued by the former government (which included the Greens), and has considerably limited the possibilities for constructing new wind farms in this federal state. Should these two parties become members of a ruling coalition at federal level, they would be on a collision course from the very beginning. Due to the unconventional style in which the Greens pursue politics, and to the value of confrontation with political opponents which the FDP has recently discovered, the new government would likely be unstable. At present, the liberals also view the Christian Democrats in a much more cautious manner than they did in 2009, and during any potential coalition talks they will demand a guarantee that they will be able to deliver on their electoral promises. This will be somewhat easier because the main point in the FDP's manifesto no longer involves taxes, but education.

[1] See M. Zawilska-Florczuk, The strength of the Christian Democrats, the weakness of the opposition. Germany before the parliamentary elections, *OSW Commentary*, 17 September 2013, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-09-17/strength-christian-democrats-weakness-opposition-germany>

[2] The FDP failed to persuade its coalition partner to considerably lower taxes and thereby to deliver on the liberal party's main electoral promise. At the same time, the reduction of the VAT rate for the hotel industry solidified the image of the FDP as a clientelist party; it has been revealed that one of Germany's hotel chain owners is a generous sponsor of the party.

[3] Brüderle argued in favour of casting the second vote (involving a party list) for the FDP, saying that “who wants to have Merkel, should choose the FDP”. Moreover, the liberals conducted a negative campaign targeting the Greens, to whom they referred as a party of “prohibitions and dictates”. The Greens indeed scored a poor result, but this did not benefit the FDP.

[4] Examples of puns: *Beta Republik Deutschland* – a reference to the official name of the state: *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [Federal Republic of Germany], or BRD for short. The word ‘Beta’ makes a reference to terminology used to denote subsequent versions of software. *German Mut* [German courage] is a rephrasing of the term ‘German angst’ [German fear] used in the English language to refer for example to Germany’s reluctance to openly assume the role of a leader in the EU. *Trial and Erfolg*, a phrase inspired by ‘trial and error’; in the rephrased version it means ‘trial and success’.

[5] See In diesem Netzwerk sind die kleinen Parteien ganz groß, *Die Welt*, 27 July 2017, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article167026786/In-diesem-Netzwerk-sind-die-kleinen-Parteien-ganz-gross.html>