

Poll shows 82 percent of Germans feel politically disenfranchised

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The gulf between official political life and the German population has reached proportions without precedent in the post-war period. According to a Forsa opinion poll on behalf of the *Stern* magazine, 82 percent of the German population believe they are politically disenfranchised. An ever-greater percentage doubt that any change can be achieved through elections.

The poll published at the end of December 2006 declares that 82 percent of the population believe that “no consideration is given to the interests of the people.” In east Germany, this figure reaches 90 percent. Only 18 percent are of the opinion that “the people have something to say.”

The data of the survey is even more explicit over the role of elections. Only 5 percent of those questioned declared that one could “strongly influence” political developments through elections. Just 48 percent believe that the voter could exert “some” influence through his or her participation in an election, while 47 percent are convinced that elections are incapable of bringing about political change. In east Germany, this latter figure again increases to 56 percent.

The opinion poll organisation Forsa also questioned citizens on their adherence to the political system as laid down in Germany’s post-war constitution (the Basic Law), which states, “All government authority proceeds from the people.” According to the inquiry, 36 percent of those questioned were dissatisfied with the constitutional political system, while 61 percent are dissatisfied with the actual functioning of the system. In east Germany, the corresponding figures were 51 and 79 percent.

The gulf between the population and official politics is also clear from the membership loss in Germany’s two main parties, which were formerly described as

“people’s parties.”

At the end of September 2006, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) had 561,070 members. This represents a loss of nearly one third of its membership since 1991, shortly after the reunification of Germany, when CDU membership topped 750,000. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) has suffered an even more drastic loss of members. In 1998, at the start of the period in government of the SPD-Green Party coalition led by SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, the party still had 755,000 members. At the end of last year, this figure had dropped to 561,000. In both parties, the largest proportion of membership is filled by men over the age of 60.

A well-known television programme devoted to the discussion of political issues took up this theme, and on January 7, television hostess Sabine Christiansen led a discussion on the topic, “Does politics still take citizens seriously?”

One of those to speak from the invited members of the audience was Axel Theissen, former chairman of the SPD local organisation in Eddelak in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. In November of last year, he quit the SPD along with 18 other members, and the local association was disbanded. The chemical plant worker vented his indignation about the policy of the party of which he had been a member for many years: “The social issue is omitted and the SPD is implementing social cuts.” This was the case during the SPD’s coalition with the Greens, and is now no different with the SPD in a grand coalition with the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU).

In fact, an unprecedented redivision of wealth had taken place between 1998 and 2005 during the period in office of the SPD-Green coalition government. Big business and the rich were awarded billions in tax cuts,

while workers and, in particular, the unemployed were forced to pick up the tab in the form of social and welfare cuts. When popular opposition grew against such measures, the SPD prematurely dissolved parliament in order to smooth the way for the CDU to take power. Since then, election promises made in 2005 have been swept aside and new measures introduced—notably a 3 percent increase in Value-Added Tax and addition of two extra years to qualify for retirement benefits. At the same time, additional cuts have been made to entitlements for the unemployed, and a fresh range of tax cuts for industry is on the way.

The latest Forsa poll makes clear that voters are disgusted with extravagant election promises, nice-sounding statements of basic policy and repeated arguments for social cuts. The widespread “disillusionment with politics and democracy” that has been often deplored by the media and political circles is an expression of popular alienation and growing opposition towards the established parties, which are beholden to corporate and financial interests that are thoroughly hostile to the needs of broad masses of working people.

The *Stern* magazine received and published a number of reader letters and e-mails. Horst Geib wrote: “It is urgently necessary to stem the entire system of lobbyism, which has our country in the grasp,” and *Stern* adds: “Like Horst Geib many readers criticise the excessive influence on political decisions by economic circles.”

The Forsa inquiry also shows, however, that there is widespread interest in establishing some sort of influence over political decision-making. An overwhelming majority (80 percent of those questioned) supported the introduction of referenda and popular votes as a means of influencing national policies.

In the television programme of January 7, it was in particular left to Gregor Gysi, a leader of Germany’s recently formed Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism, to express official disquiet over the increasing popular opposition to the political mainstream. Gysi warned his colleagues in the SPD and the CDU that they all shared a responsibility to “once again make democracy attractive.”

Gysi fears above all that opposition to the established

parties could develop into a movement directed against the capitalist order itself. He seeks to encourage the illusion that one could organise the system in a fairer manner through a few cosmetic changes.

In this respect, he raised as role model the small country of Switzerland, which has served for decades as a haven for tax refugees and millionaires. “In Switzerland the age-old principle applies: the millionaires do not need a legal pension, but the old age pension system needs the millionaires. We lack this principle,” he said.

Nobody should be deceived over Gysi’s current evocation of social issues. In its everyday political practice, Gysi’s party has continually bowed to the “pressure of conditions” and “specific obligations” in order to carry out policies at the behest of the banks and big business. At the receiving end are broad layers of the population such as the citizens of Berlin, who have painfully experienced the consequences of five years of coalition between the SPD and the Left Party in the German capital.



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