

German presidential election: A warning shot for Merkel

Peter Schwarz
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Many editorials have praised Wednesday's presidential election as evidence of Germany's properly functioning democracy. They justify this by saying that a number of delegates from the government camp voted for the opposition candidate.

In reality, there are few events in recent political history that have been so systematically and cynically manipulated as Wednesday's election.

It was the culmination of a campaign by the business and political establishment to call the Merkel government to order.

There are no differences concerning the basic outlines of Merkel's political course: fiscal consolidation at the expense of the poorest social layers and an aggressive foreign policy (participation in the Afghanistan war, austerity diktats against Greece and other indebted countries). These policies find general support in parliament, including in the ranks of the nominal opposition.

But there has been considerable criticism over the way the Merkel government is implementing these policies. It is accused of allowing itself to be diverted by internal disputes, rather than getting on with the job. It has, the charge goes, spent too much time and effort seeking to accommodate specific lobby groups, while unnecessarily stirring up the population.

The chancellor herself is accused of vacillating between the contending interests in the government camp instead of firmly laying down the course to be followed.

For weeks, leading media outlets—such as the financial daily *Handelsblatt*, the newsweekly *Der Spiegel* and conservative organs such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*—have accused Merkel of hesitation in taking unpopular decisions due to party-related tactical considerations.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP)—part of the ruling coalition along with Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU)—is also under fire for a reduction in the value-added tax for hotels, which has discredited the government's austerity

budget. FDP leader Guido Westerwelle has been accused of taking on too much in his triple role as foreign minister, vice chancellor and FDP chair.

Criticism of the government's efforts within the ruling elite is linked to the consideration that it might be advantageous for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to once again be included in the government. The last SPD chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, pushed through the Agenda 2010 welfare and labour "reforms," and the grand coalition between the SPD and the CDU that succeeded Schröder raised the retirement age. Thus, the SPD has demonstrated its ability to defy public opposition and impose attacks on social conditions.

The media campaign against Merkel reached a climax in Wednesday's presidential election.

The resignation in May of the previous president, Horst Köhler, was already a warning to Merkel. Köhler had been unusually open in his calls for the defence of Germany's economic interests by military means. When this earned him criticism in the media, he resigned on the grounds that the critics had damaged the authority of his office—an indirect criticism of the chancellor for failing to show sufficient support.

After Merkel selected CDU politician Christian Wulff to succeed Köhler, the SPD and the Greens put forward Joachim Gauck as their alternate nominee for the presidency. The former East German civil rights activist and head of the agency investigating the files of the Stasi (the East German security police), Gauck was promoted as the "candidate of the people" by a broad media alliance, from the liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Der Spiegel* to the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt* to the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*.

There is no evidence that Gauck enjoys much support among the population, or ever has. The "first free election" in the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany), the Volkskammer election of March 1990, so enthusiastically recounted by Gauck in his speeches, is not remembered fondly in East Germany. In this election, West

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl promised the people of East Germany that they would enjoy “flourishing landscapes” in a reunified Germany. Instead, they were left with scorched earth.

The election and its results gave rise to the slogan “first cheated, then lied to,” encapsulating for many former GDR citizens their experiences after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The “freely elected” Volkskammer lasted only seven months. It was mainly concerned with its own dissolution, while actual government policy was directed from Bonn, the capital of West Germany at the time.

Gauck stood as a candidate for Neues Forum (New Forum), which received just 2.9 percent of the votes cast, abruptly shattering the illusion that this group stood at the head of a popular movement. Gauck subsequently used his control of the agency investigating the Stasi files to settle old scores.

Gauck’s current “popularity” is also bogus. While massive screens were set up outside the Bundestag (parliament) on Wednesday to show live pictures of the presidential election, the square was virtually empty.

Gauck’s campaign for president was meant to show the government how things should be done. He was built up by the media as a popular tribune, a counterweight to the detached political class. In the name of freedom and responsibility, he campaigned for cuts in welfare and military operations in Afghanistan.

The unemployed and those on welfare were little impressed, but the Greens lapped it up. Gauck’s campaign penetrated deep into the government coalition.

While the media declared that Merkel should resign in the event of a defeat for her candidate, Wulff, the government camp increasingly saw the election as an opportunity to send Merkel a warning. In the first and second ballots, which required an absolute majority, Wulff failed by 44 and 29 votes, respectively. These were votes of delegates from the CDU and FDP camp cast in defiance of Merkel.

Merkel was humiliated. Only in the third and last round, where a plurality was sufficient, did Wulff receive an absolute majority.

Merkel has received a clear message. She can no longer count on the support of her own party if she does not ruthlessly pursue the course demanded by leading financial and business circles. She “cannot escape the legitimate expectations of powerful governance,” Heribert Prantl, the domestic political editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote.

President Wulff, who comes from a conservative, Catholic milieu, will stand at her side and seek to emulate Gauck.

At the same time, with their nomination of the conservative Gauck, the SPD and Greens have demonstrated that they are ready to rejoin the federal government at any

time and continue Schröder’s policies of welfare cuts.

To this end, the Left Party is providing them with political cover. Since its inception three years ago, this party has shown it is prepared to head off growing social opposition and divert it into harmless political channels. At the same time, it advocates a return of the SPD and the Greens to government, offering every possible support.

In the presidential election, this cooperation entered a new stage. The Left Party repeatedly called on the SPD and Greens to stand a joint candidate, even if he or she came from the conservative camp. They even raised the possibility of a three-party joint candidate, the former environment minister Klaus Töpfer (CDU).

But that was not sufficient for the SPD and the Greens. By seeking the Left Party’s support for Gauck, an avowed anti-communist, they sought to force the Left Party into a position of condemning the Stalinist-run former GDR.

That was too much for the Left Party, whose roots go back to the ruling Stalinist party in the former GDR. Although some its leaders campaigned for Gauck, official support for him by the party would have been too much for its members and voters.

The Left Party went only half way. In the third ballot, the Left Party withdrew its own candidate, Lucretia Jochimsen, but made no recommendation to vote for Gauck. In the end, a majority of the 124 delegates of the Left Party abstained.

Nevertheless, the Left Party has taken a further step towards closer cooperation with the SPD and the Greens. If the SPD and Greens get the opportunity to continue Schröder’s policy of welfare cuts, they can firmly count on support from the Left Party.

For working people, the events of Wednesday must be a lesson. Faced with the worst economic crisis in 80 years, the ruling class is moving towards authoritarian forms of rule.

The call for someone who can “provide a sense of the nation, who tells us what has to be done” (Josef Joffe in *Die Zeit*), could be heard throughout the campaign. Only an independent working class movement—independent of the SPD, the Left Party and the reformist trade unions—advocating a socialist programme can stop this danger.

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