

Who are the German Pirates?

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Ever since the Pirate Party's entry into the German parliament, following its success in the Berlin and Saarland regional elections, it has become the focus of media attention. The Pirates are currently polling 13 percent in nationwide surveys, and have overtaken the Greens to become Germany's third strongest political force after the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD). The Emnid polling institute even estimates its potential voters at 30 percent of the population. If poll predictions of between 7 and 11 percent prove correct, the Pirates will also enter the state parliaments in the upcoming state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW).

The Pirate Party has been courted by the media to such an extent that Pirate terms like "liquid feedback" have become part of journalistic jargon. It is depicted as a young, fresh and dynamic party that is shaking up the established parties. However, little attention is paid to the Pirates' political views or the backgrounds of the party's leading candidates in the North Rhine-Westphalia state election. Investigation of these issues exposes the Pirates as a purely bourgeois party, lacking even the most remote potential for social protest or governmental opposition.

Wide media coverage was given to the Pirates' special party congress in Dortmund in mid-April, when the NRW Pirates finalised their election program. The program's 76 pages are headed: "Considering we don't have one, there's a lot to read here". This was meant ironically, but it turned out to be the grim truth.

The preamble gives lip-service to democracy and the constitution, but absolutely nothing is said about the political, social and economic situation in North Rhine-Westphalia, the country's largest state and the birthplace of German industrialisation.

The high rate of unemployment and rampant poverty in the cities of the Ruhr area, the municipal financial crisis and the consequent decay of public infrastructure—all this is apparently irrelevant for the Pirates. The parliamentary manoeuvre, whereby Prime Minister Hannelore Kraft (SPD) enforced new elections to obtain a more stable coalition in order to impose more brutal attacks on social welfare—is of no concern whatsoever to the Pirates.

Instead, the reader has to wade through demands for first-aid courses, the legal sale of nicotine liquids in cigarette substitutes and the promotion of digital games as a cultural asset. The election program looks as if it has been written by someone living in a cocoon and lacking any contact with the outside world. And it is not even original. Many of the demands about education, financing and drug policy have been posed in a similar form by the Greens, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Left Party over the past 20 years.

The Pirates' education policy advocates flexible school systems for children. It recommends that pupils repeat classes only in those subjects in which they are particularly weak. The Pirates want free education from preschool to college. However, they are also ready to associate with the FDP and the CDU, despite the fact that these parties

are in favour of "private funding of educational institutions" and continue to support the drive to establish private universities.

The Pirates refuse to make any concrete statements about fiscal policy. At the special party conference in Dortmund, they basically adopted mere position papers that set out the framework for a future fiscal policy. These papers commit the Pirate Party to "sound budgetary policies and disciplined expenditure. This includes a balanced state budget". These are code words for a commitment to the "debt brake", whereby massive cuts in social spending are to be enforced.

The sentence rehashed by leading candidates Michele Marsching and Joachim Paul—"Nothing can be said about fiscal policy, because no transparent figures have been made available"—is also a purely defensive statement, designed to signal willingness to use the financial situation as an excuse for supporting spending cuts and the demolition of social services after the election.

Contrary to the public's perception of the Pirates as a "protest party", they uphold the sacred cows of market structures and competition as social panaceas. They claim public transport could be made more efficient by promoting privatisation and fostering free competition among transport companies. The same is said to hold true for the supply of gas and electricity.

Regarding labour market and social policies, the NRW Pirates commit themselves to the demand for an unconditional basic income. However, they point out that this is not feasible at the state level, and only ask for improvements to the drafting of the Hartz IV welfare benefits regulations.

The Pirates' apparently progressive commitment to an unconditional basic income is merely a sham. Only a few weeks ago, the party's relevant working group proposed that this basic income should not exceed €440 (\$583) a month. Additional subsidies for housing costs were to be permitted, but the rate of benefits would still have been under the Hartz IV level, which at least would have covered the rent.

The Pirates have nothing to say about foreign policy. The subject is studiously avoided both at the state level of their movement and in their federal party program. However, a position paper submitted to the Dortmund party congress is noteworthy in this respect. The paper demands that "Germany should no longer be involved in conflicts and wars; if it must be, then at least with more restraint than in recent years".

This kind of qualified demand for "a bit of peace" is extended to domestic politics, where they call for the "suspension of deportations and detention (of asylum seekers), as far as this is permitted by the country's legal authorities". This amounts to a green light for more deportations, because it can always be argued that the federal government is responsible for these matters and state politicians and authorities thus have no room for manoeuvre.

The fact that the Pirates are content to wallow in boundless opportunism was already evident from their list of candidates. Immediately after the dissolution of the Düsseldorf state parliament, state chairman Michele Marsching mentioned to the Bonn *General-Anzeiger* newspaper the Pirate slogan: “Get into the state parliament—no matter how”. Questioned about the list of candidates, he said he would certainly like to run, but with the Pirates you never knew who would be on the list: “Maybe someone will turn up who can speak well, or is good-looking or simply has a lot of money”.

And that is exactly what happened. While some Pirates justified their candidacy for the state list on the basis of their practical skills as craftsmen or technicians, it was Joachim Paul who ended up as the party’s leading candidate. He called for smaller classes in NRW schools.

Joachim Paul is a lecturer at the Rhineland State Association’s Centre for Media and Education, and supporter of the system theory views of Heinz von Foerster, Francisco Varela, Humberto Maturana and Niklas Luhmann. This variant of radial constructivism is based on autopoietic mechanisms operating as self-referential systems. Such system analysis contends that social subsystems—e.g., economics, law and politics—are loosely connected, but function according to their own logic and can barely influence each other. Therefore, politics mainly can only be about the quest for power and can have little to do with the control of social processes.

Such theorising is not only extremely conservative, owing to its privileging of the status quo as a kind of logical necessity; it is also deeply cynical. The systems theorist Niklas Luhmann once described failure to comply with campaign promises as a “structurally necessary condition”, and implicitly recommended that parties be both for and against a (controversial) issue in election campaigns—or, even better, avoid questions about it altogether.

In this respect, Joachim Paul can feel himself at home among the Pirates. According to a political pamphlet published in 2011, he sees the Pirates as the expression of a technology-savvy Internet community, involved in creating radically new forms of consciousness. He refers to these new modes of consciousness as comprising a “new, young I-experience: the experience of being a nodal point in a network, maintaining and sharing relationships and bonds with others via that network”.

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In a similarly esoteric vein, he describes the Pirate Party’s main task as being the “creation of new spaces of possibility”. However, these “spaces of possibility” are not supposed to apply to working people. As far as Paul is concerned, the “working class is a social model that has become redundant”. In this respect, he concludes that the Social Democratic-Green approach of Agenda 2010 (deregulation and creation of the low-wage sector) had been correct, except that SPD leaders Gerhard Schröder and Wolfgang Clement had gone too far, allowing “innovative small businesses” in Germany to be devoured by international financial speculators.

State Chairman Michele Marsching, who managed to be placed high on the list of candidates, is an independent software developer. His blog has more to say about his feelings about being a Pirate, his time spent on parental leave from employment, and his walks with his dog than about his views on educational and financial policies. It is noteworthy, however, that Marsching has already called for an increase in the allowance for state parliamentary deputies and, like Joachim Paul, bemoans the party’s otherwise much-cherished

principle of the grassroots democracy. While Paul is in favour of a professionalisation of the party’s structures, including a paid party executive, Marsching prefers the building of delegations and negotiations behind closed doors.

As the current polling virtually guaranteed their safe passage into parliament, those heading the candidates’ list were in great demand in Münster. The grand total of 56 candidates prompted former Pirate national director Marina Weisband to speak of a veritable “gold rush”. It had never been so easy to become a politician and draw on state sinecures and allowances as it was then with the Pirates.

Until then, the NRW Pirates had only managed to do this in very few city and municipal councils, where most of their seats were filled by defectors from the Greens and especially the Left Party. Only in the small town of Werl have they so far managed to form a party faction. This was possible because the entire local branch of the Left Party there transferred to the Pirate Party in January 2012. Commenting on the new grouping at the time, faction leader Matthias Fischer said he would now concentrate “less on the class struggle and more on compromise”.

This readiness to compromise is now continuing at the state level. Michele Marsching told national daily *Die Welt*: “We can work with all parties”, and announced in advance the prospect of “theme-based coalitions”. Interviewed by the weekly *Die Zeit*, leading candidate Joachim Paul added that, although they believed they were “not yet fit to govern”, they did not want to obstruct the formation of governing bodies.

The Pirates spread the slogan: “This system is in need of an update”. They advocate a few cosmetic improvements in order to spruce up existing conditions to some extent. They propagate the idea that democracy is essentially a question of transparency and can be advanced by a few technical changes, thus completely masking the relevance of social context. While attacks on democratic rights are on the increase throughout Europe and a layer of super-rich is determining the fate of European society, the Pirate Party argues for “liquid feedback” and video broadcasts of parliamentary sessions.

This ignorance and indifference to the greater social context and social issues has its roots in the Pirates’ social base of support. At the time of its creation, the party may have been predominantly sustained by Internet-oriented young people. However, it has long since become the platform for a well-heeled clientele.

The new fresh faces of the Pirate Party have become an important asset to the ruling elite. While all the parties are closing ranks and calling in unison for fiscal consolidation, the debt brake and cuts in social services, growing sections of the population are turning their backs on official politics. The Pirate Party has assumed the task of keeping these layers within the framework of bourgeois politics and thwarting the development of a socialist movement. Their misleading name, erroneously associating them with the notion of rebellion, and their substantive indifference to the major social issues combine to serve this goal.



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