



# German Liberalism: an Endangered Species?

September 30, 2013 **E. Wayne Merry** *The National Interest*

**Related Categories:** Europe

The British historian AJP Taylor believed that in Germany, classical liberalism always fails in the competition of political ideas. For over six decades, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) has tried to prove Taylor wrong. The FDP—which calls itself “Die Liberalen”—champions free-market economics and protection of civil liberties, while remaining the most “Atlanticist” of the German political parties.

In the recent national elections, the FDP was crushed. They did not just fall below the five percent vote threshold for entry into the Bundestag; their defeat endangers the very existence of the FDP as an institution and as a voice for classical liberal principles.

The good news is that opinion polls show the electoral rout was not a public rejection of what the FDP stands for, but of the party leadership and performance in recent years. The bad news is the scope of the rejection.

The FDP lost votes to all its electoral competitors, the only party to do so. It lost over two million votes to the Christian Democrats (CDU), its senior partner in government till the election, and over half a million votes to the Social Democrats (SPD), nearly half a million to the new, Euroskeptical Alternative for Germany, plus significant numbers to the Greens and even to the Left party, with which the FDP shares no views whatsoever. It lost almost half a million votes to stay-at-homes. In short, voters fled the FDP to almost every point on the political compass.

This disaster is the more striking because, in the previous national election in 2009, the FDP scored its best showing ever, with 14.6 percent. Now it has lost almost a full ten percentage points while participating in a governing coalition with the CDU, which achieved its best electoral performance in a generation. Only a few years ago, the FDP was a coalition partner at the state level in states containing half the population of the country and appealed strongly to younger, independent voters. Since then, a series of failures in state elections were precursors to the national collapse.

What happened? In a word, leadership, or a lack thereof. The party which gave postwar Germany the likes of Walter Scheel, Otto Graf Lambsdorff, and Hans Dietrich Genscher tried to appeal to postunification voters with younger and slicker party leaders whose lack of substance and depth was evident to all. Guido Westerwelle has been the most ineffectual foreign minister ever fielded by the Federal Republic, while Philipp Roesler as economics minister received no popular credit for the country's strong economic performance. Rather than gaining political stature by association with Angela Merkel's successful regime, the FDP ministers were widely regarded as little better than pilot fish.

In previous coalitions, the FDP had managed the delicate balance of junior partner and independent role. Genscher, for example, was long the public face of Germany to the world. German voters regarded a coalition with the FDP as “safer” than a single-party government and more effective than a grand coalition of CDU and SPD. In return, many voters cast their first ballot (in their constituency) for the CDU or SPD but their second (the party list ballot) for the FDP. This year, almost four million voters decided the FDP was no longer worth the trouble.

Does it matter? German politics fragmented in the aftermath of unification, making government formation increasingly difficult. Younger voters, especially in the east, have less sense of Germany's place in Europe than did their parents, leading to the merger of the former East German Communists with breakaways from the SPD to create the Left Party, to the appearance of various neo-Nazi movements, and to the counterculture Pirate Party. The Free Democrats tend to be less provincial and inward-looking than most Germans. Alone among German parties, the FDP does not regard the free market and finance as somehow unclean and tainted with sin. The Free Democrats possess a healthy skepticism about the overextended European project, but do not see the solution for Europe's problems in more regulation and control in Brussels.

In addition, the Free Democrats remain committed to Germany's trans-Atlantic identity. Increasingly, Germans view America as a relationship of self-interest and habit. For the FDP, it remains one of conviction. The intense (indeed, almost hysterical) German public and press reaction to revelations of NSA activities in Germany demonstrates the erosion of the residue of the Cold War German-American partnership. A Bundestag without the FDP compounds that erosion.

Can the FDP recover and return to national politics? Perhaps, but it will not be easy. Angela Merkel thus far shows little interest in the future of a junior partner she found annoying. The FDP still exists as a party structure and in a few state governments (including Hesse, where it cleared the five percent threshold in state elections while failing at the national level). The first test will be in European Parliament elections next year where the threshold is only three percent.

The FDP has never before been shut out of the Bundestag. To return it will require more than new leadership; it must prove to German voters that it has an identity and worthwhile principles that other German parties do not. The Greens argue, somewhat speciously, that they are now the true home of classical liberalism in Germany. The FDP needs to show more than opportunism; it needs to demonstrate why liberal concepts are valid for a post–Cold War and Eurocentric Germany.

For decades, the Free Democrats have been a healthy factor in the public life of the German Federal Republic. However, in politics, to be healthy a party must first be alive, and this one just suffered a near-death experience.

*E. Wayne Merry is Senior Fellow for Europe and Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.*