The more the merrier

Germans shouldn’t worry about fragmentation of their party system — more parties in parliament is good for democracy

By André Krouwel | 11.12.2018

The Bundestag decorated with a Christmas tree

Read this article in German.

The 2017 German federal election resulted in the highest level of parliamentary fragmentation in the post-war period: six political parties are now represented in parliament Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) received their lowest combined vote share since the World War II. Many Germans fear that, in the future, this may lead to instability and problematic government formation. There is, however, very little reason for panic as in most other European countries many more parties are represented in parliament. Governments in the Netherlands, for instance, sometimes have four or five coalition partners.

In many European countries, we see an increasingly diverse political landscape: in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom the legislature has become more fragmented. In France, Denmark and Portugal the trend is less pronounced – more fluctuation or even a recent decline. Also, in Italy, the peak of fragmentation was in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Next to the fragmentation, German citizens also worry about the increasing polarisation — with the left-wing party Die Linke and the right-wing, conservative newcomer Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Like in the Netherlands, the anti-immigrant party is the largest opposition party.

During the last government formation, Die Grünen (The Greens) were at the negotiation table for a short period, yet the centre-right parties — particularly the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) did not want to form a government with the left-leaning Greens. The FDP had just returned to parliament
after failing to gain any seat in the 2013 election. Before, they had been represented since 1949 in no
less than twenty centre-right and centre-left governments.

It’s about cooperation and compromise

But having a large number of parties in parliament is not synonymous with political instability, just as
large families are not automatically dysfunctional. Happy families and stable governments are not
about numbers, but about a willingness to compromise, to listen to others, understanding their
concerns, interests and developing a sensitivity for other peoples’ deepest convictions. Stable
governments are about political moderation and centrism, about taking the overlapping interests of
various social groups into consideration.

Arend Lijphart, the Dutch-American scholar famous for defining such consensus democracy
principles, argued that, despite having deep political conflict lines, governments can still be stable and
effective if elites are pragmatic, cooperative and willing to bridge social divides. What needs to be
avoided or remedied is that cleavages reinforce one another, so that political and economic resources
become structured along class, religious or ethnic lines and certain groups become permanently
excluded. As long as social divisions cut across one another, their political relevance is weakened and
citizens do not feel the need to retreat to their ‘own group’.

Smaller parties popping up at the fringes of the party system only becomes relevant when it affects the
ability of centrist elites to compromise because these fringe parties gain blackmail potential and
powers to extort the major actors out of sensible and viable policy choices. So, the question is: did the
entry of new political competitors fundamentally reshape the German political landscape and the
ability of the centrist forces (in particular the CDU and SPD) to form stable and responsible
governments?

More parties, more democracy

First, in Germany very few new relevant parties have entered parliament: in the post-war period only
Die Grünen, Die Linke and the AfD. This makes Germany the most resilient and stable party system on
the European continent. Die Grünen have also proven to be responsible parties of government in two
coalitions with the social democrats. Even if these more radical parties grow further and the SPD and
CDU become weaker, this does not lead to automatic system failure. A larger number of political
parties in parliament might actually indicate a better representation of various interests.

The Netherlands have one of the lowest electoral thresholds in the world (0.67 per cent), resulting in
many new parties successfully competing for seats in parliament. Moreover, the previously dominant
Christian Democrats (CDA) and the Social Democrats (PvdA) which controlled over 70 per cent of the
seats have now been reduced to less than 20 per cent. This makes the Dutch party system one of the
most volatile on the European continent. Nevertheless, Dutch governments have remained relatively
stable, centrist and produced viable policies that made the small country the 9th richest country on
earth (admittedly because of German proximity).

Critics will say: ‘But look at Italy, where extremist oppositional forces have formed a coalition against
more moderate and experienced governmental parties.’ This will not happen any time soon in
Germany, as Die Linke and Die Grünen are unlikely to join forces with AfD. The AfD, as most of the
other anti-immigrant parties, do not constitute a credible political alternative. Both the CDU (together
with its sister party CSU) and the SPD are also unlikely to abandon core policies due to extortion from
extremist fringes. In addition, German voters are still in majority in favour of responsible, centrist and
viable [economic] policies. And they have much to lose, as does Europe — and the entire world for that matter — if the German political system derails.