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The more the merrier

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

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.



André Krouwel
Amsterdam

André Krouwel is Professor of Comparative Politics and Communication at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and founder of Wahlkompass Online Voting Advice.