

THE SUCCESS OF THE GERMAN GREENS AND FAILURE OF THEIR AMERICAN COUSINS

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This paper explores the varied reasons for the success of the Green Party in Germany and the continued failure of environmentally conscious parties in the United States. The explanations for these contrasting levels of success are found in their differing political cultures, opposing electoral systems, and the distinctive roles that interest groups play in each nation. Germany's political culture is clearly more welcoming to political parties outside the typical framework. The United States' two-party political system, unlike Germany's mixed-member proportional representation electoral system, results in a homogenization of political ideas, leaving little room for any third party. In contrast to Germany, the role that interest groups can play in America has made it virtually impossible for any kind of environmentally conscious political movement to gain traction at any level of government.

As science has continually predicted, the state of the Earth's environment will soon reach an inflection point from which there is no return. This reality takes up much of everyday life; whether it be the headlines we read, the way we handle our garbage, or the choices we make at the ballot box—it would be hard to argue that living with the reality of climate change is not a daily occurrence. Yet, despite the obvious role they play in the everyday, these issues are often not reflected at a governmental level, at least not in North America. It seems that North Americans are behind their European counterparts when it comes to ecological representation at government and policy levels. In their most recent election, the German Greens took an impressive 15% share of the 2021 vote, whereas in the United States it is difficult to find a party with environment-first priorities making much headway in any given election, no matter the level of some municipal gains.¹ So, this begs the

¹Paul Kirby, "Germany Elections: Centre-Left Claim Narrow Win over Merkel's Party," *BBC News*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58698806>.

question, why is it that a Green party in Europe can galvanize such support, while environmentally conscious political parties struggle so much on the western side of the Atlantic? To answer this seemingly simple question, this paper will look at the case studies of the success of the German Green party against Green and other ecologically conscious parties in the United States that have found little to no success. The stark differences uncovered between the United States and Germany's institutions and culture reflect the former's inability to support an ecological party, while the latter allow for an environment-first party to thrive.

Germany's political culture often aligns with and has been welcoming to the Four Pillars of the Green Party (social justice, ecological wisdom, nonviolence, and grassroots democracy), which has been instrumental in the success of the Greens in Germany. We see an example of the Greens championing these pillars by their gendered policies that have elevated women in German politics for the last three or more decades.² By being at the forefront of feminism in a relatively inclusive culture, the Greens were able to attain recognition and would even go on to spearhead the change of the gendered landscape in German politics, a move that was soon followed by their political contemporaries.³ Although not quite as firm as in their 1980 inauguration, the Greens have also called for much less spending on the military and for funds to be used in social and welfare programs.⁴ This pacifism aligned not only with the relatively pacifist ideals of a new generation of socialists, but also appealed to many voters wary of Germany's authoritarian and militarist past. Furthermore, environmentalism in politics is not as foreign a concept to many Germans as it may be in the United States. The success of the Greens at all levels of government in the 1990s has normalized environmental politics for an entire generation of regularly voting German citizens, which has undoubtedly led to their continued success in the Bundestag.⁵ So, along with the normalizing of the Greens in government, one can see how they not only appeal to the concerns of environmental degradation, but to a dynamic number of socialist ideals that are held in high regard in German political culture.

American political culture has no place for an environmentally conscious party to succeed. Like their German contemporaries, the American Greens follow the same Four Pillars of the Green Party,⁶ which can largely be interpreted as having socialist influence—a notion that is not generally welcomed by the voting public in the

²Andrei S. Markovits, and Joseph Klaver, "Alive and Well into the Fourth Decade of Their Bundestag Presence: A Tally of the Greens' Impact on the Federal Republic of Germany's Political Life and Public Culture," *German Politics and Society* 33, no. 4 (2015): 121.

³Markovits and Klaver, 122.

⁴Emil Kwidziński, "German Green Party: The Evolution of Political Agenda," *Journal of Geography, Politics & Society* 10, no. 2 (April 2020): 49.

⁵Markovits and Klaver, 116.

⁶"Green Party US," The Green Party of the United States, <https://www.gp.org/>.

United States, at least not explicitly.⁷ This distrust has historical roots as American capitalists have often sought the elimination of socialism in American politics.⁸ This narrative still holds true today, as can be evidenced by the constant drumming up of fears of so-called big government socialists from the non-socialist American left.⁹ This may be a case of the American public being unaware of what socialism truly means, but many, especially those voters loyal to the American right, may see the Greens as part of a socialist cohort. This has resulted in the general American public being too wary of the perceived socialist notions that make up the Green Party. Furthermore, America's belief in the necessity and size of their military is almost religious, as can be shown by their unmatched military investment, and to not support the military would be very detrimental to any political movement.¹⁰ Of course, military spending would not align with the pillar of "nonviolence" which the Green Party maintains and would certainly result in the dilution of the American Green Party's political platform, further damaging their electoral chances. Finally, the notion of an ecologically friendly party is so far from being normalized in the American mind, let alone institutionalized, that the Greens were not even nationally registered until 2001.¹¹ Given this perception of the Greens as a fringe party, combined with American distrust of the socialist ideas represented by the Four Pillars of the Green Party, it is clear that the political culture of the United States is either not ready for, or willing to accept, any kind of ecologically minded party at any political level.

Germany's mixed member proportional representation (MMP) electoral system and multi-party system have allowed the Greens to flourish in the Bundestag. Essentially, the German MMP consists of two votes, the first as a direct vote in one's voting district, and the second as a vote from a party list.¹² The Bundestag is then aligned based on proportional voting, but for a party to be eligible to receive votes from the party list they need to galvanize at least five percent of the total vote to be represented. This system has allowed the Greens to gain many secondary votes and a place in the Bundestag. To help contextualize how this process is beneficial for the German Greens, one should look to their emergence as a viable ideology in the late 1960s and through the 1970s in Western Germany. During this

⁷James Broughel, "The Unlikely Story of American Regulatory Socialism," *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 148.

⁸Rob Bryer, "Americanism and Financial Accounting Theory – Part 3: Adam Smith, the Rise and Fall of Socialism, and Irving Fisher's Theory of Accounting," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 24, no. 7-8 (November 2013): 586.

⁹Peter Certo, "Who's Afraid of 'Socialism'?" *Institute for Policy Studies*, February 12, 2020. <https://ips-dc.org/whos-afraid-of-socialism/>.

¹⁰Max Roser, and Mohamed Nagdy, "Military Spending," *Our World in Data*, August 3, 2013, <https://ourworldindata.org/military-spending>.

¹¹Russel E. Cole, "Critical Cultural Analysis of a Midwestern State Green Party," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (December 2010): 871.

¹²Alexander Fink, "The Effects of Party Campaign Spending under Proportional Representation: Evidence from Germany," *European Journal of Political Economy* 28, no. 4 (December 2012): 576.

time, amid student protests, the German people felt disillusioned and untrusting of their government after decades of tumultuous and horrific leadership, which allowed the Greens to position themselves as the “parliamentary wing of the protest movements.”¹³ In many other voting systems, the Greens would have found it difficult to find much support, but as the MMP system allowed voters to give so-called fringe parties a voice, they were able to find success at both the state and national level. Furthermore, this multi-party system allowed the Greens to take the next step to the federal stage in 1998 where they formed the first Red-Green coalition government with the Social Democrats that lasted almost a decade.¹⁴ Had it not been for the MMP electoral system, the Greens would have been pushed out by other larger parties. MMP representation has also allowed for greater diversity among parties in the Bundestag, as they were able to gather a substantial voting base and enter a coalition with the Social Democrats, thus propelling the Greens to national success and allowing them to become an eventual mainstay in the German political zeitgeist.

In stark contrast to Germany, the American electoral system leaves little room for any environmentally conscious parties to thrive. The complex voting system in the United States consists of elements of first-past-the-post and indirect popular vote. This more than two-hundred-year-old system only allows for two dominant parties to survive: the left-leaning Democrats and right-leaning Republicans. The first issue with having a two-party system is that the difference in philosophies can be marginal. As the former leader of the US Green Party Dr. Jill Stein points out, the difference is often moot and does not allow for much of a spectrum of ideas, which is of course in contrast to the Bundestag where six parties currently hold significant power as of 2021.¹⁵ This marginal difference between the parties ultimately results in a homogenization of ideas, so that parties which champion ideas outside the status quo would be seen as radical, such as the American Greens and their prioritization of the environment. Moreover, the first-past-the-post system in the United States leaves no room for another party, as voters feel inclined to vote for the lesser of two evils. This means that a citizen may not vote for the Green party as they may believe it to be a wasted vote, even if their personal political philosophy is more aligned with the more socialist Greens than with the non-socialist leftist Democrats. Unlike the German MMP system where voters have flexibility with their two votes, Americans often must vote strategically. We see an example of this fear when Dr. Stein discusses how political pundits blamed the success of the Greens in the 2002 election as taking away from a Democrat victory in Florida,

¹³Silke Mende, “‘Enemies at the Gate’: The West German Greens and Their Arrival at the Bundestag—Between Old Ideals and New Challenges,” *German Politics and Society* 33, no. 4 (2015): 69.

¹⁴Markovits and Klaver, 117.

¹⁵Michael Lerner, “Third-Party Politics: A Conversation Between Green Party Candidate Jill Stein and Michael Lerner,” *Tikkun* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 53.

which would have changed the outcome.¹⁶ Although the 2002 electoral loss for the Greens was more complex than this, these fears likely persist in the mind of the American voter, and first-past-the post-voting reinforces a common belief that a vote for a third party is a wasted one. Therefore, the electoral college which favours a two-party system and the homogenizing of political philosophies leaves no space for a third party like the Greens to succeed or to present any ideas outside the collective political thought, as they would be considered too radical.

The structured role of interest groups in Germany has also played a vital role in allowing for the Green Party to succeed. Interest groups in Germany play an important and institutionalized role in policymaking. Unlike in the United States, German interest groups are institutionalized in a way that allows them to be somewhat regulated by the government, as the group itself will work in tandem with the government to create policy. This is notable as it gives interest groups a direct line of communication with the government. As global temperatures continue to climb, the calls for action against climate change are rising in Germany, and these interest groups can give the average citizen a voice.¹⁷ This is important for the Green Party as their interests, which often align with grassroots movements, can be expressed through policy that is created by the combined efforts of interest groups and policymakers. However, the most important aspect that makes Germany a more welcoming environment for the German Greens, while moving it even further away from the United States, is the cap placed on interest group spending. By contrast, the United States is an outlier among Western democracies concerning the amount of money that is disbursed by interest groups, and it is the conservative nature of the German approach to corporate interest spending that allows a grassroots party like the Greens to find electoral success. This is perhaps best contextualized by the glaring difference in campaign advertisements, as ad campaign spending in a German election cycle is minimal, partly due to its shorter election campaigns, which is more glaring when compared to the enormous spending on ad campaigns which Americans are accustomed to almost year-round.¹⁸ Again, this lack of spending on advertising would undoubtedly be beneficial to the Greens who tend to remove themselves from corporate spending.

Far removed from Germany, the power of interest groups in the United States is too great and overwhelming for an ecological party to succeed, especially at the grassroots level. Like Germany, interest groups play an important role in American society, but the playing field for interest groups is vastly different from Germany, as they are autonomous bodies from the government and there is no cap on spending

¹⁶Lerner, 53.

¹⁷Heike Klüver, "The Survival of Interest Groups: Evidence from Germany," *West European Politics* 43, no. 7 (November 2020): 1444.

¹⁸Jürgen Maier and Michaela Maier, "Audience Reactions to Negative Campaign Spots in the 2005 German National Elections: The Case of Two Ads Called 'The Ball'," *Human Communication* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 331.

by a third party following the *Citizens United vs the Federal Election Commission* decision by the Supreme Court. This means that if an interest group has enough capital, they can essentially spend as much money as they see fit to pressure or influence a campaign in a direction that aligns with their own interests. An example of this can be found at the state level in Massachusetts, which was one of the initial states set to be a leader of binding emissions targets.¹⁹ Yet, despite public support, these early efforts have either stalled or been eliminated at the behest of massive investment from fossil fuel lobbyists and interest groups.²⁰ This political outlook does not bode well for the Green Party, whose platform relies on grassroots support, which proves difficult when you consider the limits on spending that an individual can donate to a candidate committee is capped at under three thousand dollars per election.²¹ When considering the environmental direction the Greens wish to take the United States, it is also clear that they would certainly be at odds with the powerful, wealthy, and highly organized interest and pressure groups that are often funded by the fossil fuel industry and its beneficiaries. For the Green Party to find real traction with voters there would need to be an elimination of unlimited third-party spending. As Dr. Stein concedes in response to the argument that Rabbi Michael Lerner puts forth, the reality of interest groups holding too much sway in politics and policy will not change anytime soon, as “any legislation that seeks to limit the elites of money or corporate power will simply be overturned and declared unconstitutional.”²² Clearly, the power of these groups will not diminish unless the system itself changes, but considering how institutionalized these powerful groups are, it may be a long time until we see the American Green Party gain any real political success.

To conclude, Germany’s political institutions and culture allow for an ecologically driven party like the Greens to prosper, while the systems and culture present in the United States effectively suffocates any chance of an American Green party finding electoral traction. The differences are drastic between the two countries, as the German socialist values that often line their political culture are hospitable for the Four Pillars of the Green Party, while the dominance of capitalistic tendencies and distrust of socialism in the United States make the success of an American ecological party difficult. The institutions of both countries broaden this divide, with the German MMP representation allowing more diversity in political philosophy and the number of parties in the Bundestag, while the American electoral college essentially only maintains room for two parties that share a similar

¹⁹Trevor Cullhane, Galen Hall, and J. Timmons Roberts. “Who Delays Climate Action? Interest Groups and Coalitions in State Legislative Struggles in the United States,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 79 (September 2021): 1.

²⁰Cullhane, Hall, and Roberts, 1.

²¹“Contribution Limits,” Federal Election Commission, accessed November 13, 2021, <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/>.

²²Lerner, 71.

ideology. Finally, the systemic way in which interest groups coexist with government and actions groups in Germany allows the Greens a voice, whereas the power of big money in American interest groups cuts out that voice. Undoubtedly, there are advantages and disadvantages to each system and the answer as to which is better for the government will not be answered here, but what can be said is that as we approach the point of environmental disaster, it would be beneficial to all if we could give voice to those who are working tirelessly to combat this impending tragedy.

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