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Party Institutions, the SPD and the Fall of Franz Müntefering

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Franz Müntefering's resignation as Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) on 31 October 2005 after only eighteen months caught most observers by surprise—especially German Social Democrats. His fall was the unintended consequence of a contest in the SPD Executive Committee to nominate the party's new general secretary. Neither Müntefering nor those who voted against his preferred candidate for general secretary sought his departure. Indeed, Müntefering was the kind of chairman the SPD had not experienced since Erich Ollenhauer in the 1950s: he was not a charismatic electoral leader, but rather a disciplined, energetic party man—an “old school” Social Democrat who was popular with rank-and-file members. Furthermore, a month before his resignation, Chairman Müntefering and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder snatched a strategic victory from certain defeat in an election that made it impossible to form a stable parliamentary majority without their party. As Schröder departed the political stage, Müntefering marshaled an uncharacteristically disciplined SPD to successful coalition negotiations with a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and a Christian Social Union (CSU) weakened by a poor showing in the election. Given that Müntefering piloted the party through these troubled waters, why did Social Democrats provoke his resignation, shattering the SPD's renewed image of competence and weakening the nascent grand coalition?

Müntefering's resignation is interesting because it fits into a pattern of very public internal party conflicts over policy and personnel decisions, stretching back to the SPD's postwar reconstruction.

Louise K. Davidson-Schmich, *Becoming Party Politicians: East German State Legislators in the Decade following Democratization* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006)

Reviewed by Laurence McFalls, German and European Studies, Université de Montréal

The social scientific potential of the "natural" experiments generated from postcommunist transitions is far from exhausted. The outlier case of Germany's unilateral, rapid, complete, and largely successful transfer of institutions from West to East still offers textbook opportunities for political scientists to test their favorite theories—neo-institutionalism in particular. Louise Davidson-Schmich's book, *Becoming Party Politicians: East German State Legislators in the Decade following Democratization*, on Landtag members in the five new eastern states of the Federal Republic offers an outstanding workmanlike example. Adopting non-dogmatically the theoretical expectations of rational-choice institutionalism, Davidson-Schmich seeks to demonstrate that the institutional logic and incentives of partisan representative democracy imported from the western Länder rapidly imposed party discipline on eastern legislators indistinguishable from that in the western states despite socialization experiences under communism and during an almost revolutionary transition that militated against such behavior.

On the basis of interviews with thirty-four legislators and analyses of parliamentary debates and voting, Davidson-Schmich examines first how eastern politicians—despite their pervasive distrust of and inexperience with political parties—quickly learned that their electoral survival depended not only on joining an established party but, once in office, these same politicians, despite a rhetoric emphasizing suprapartisan ideals, quickly submitted to the whip of party discipline, voting in bloc not only to maintain their party's or coalition's majority if they supported the government but also, when in opposition, to maintain their party's electoral profile and to simplify their own decision making—party discipline being a heuristic tool in issues areas beyond a legislator's personal competence. Third, Davidson-Schmich goes on to test the strength of the logic of party discipline

particular issues where eastern values and experiences shared by politicians and mass publics would suggest deviations from the west-imposed norm. For example, easterners are in principle more favorable to citizen initiatives and other forms of direct democracy, but in practice eastern legislatures have been as parsimonious as those in the West in yielding party-government power directly to the people. Predictably, only opposition parties, whatever their ideological orientation, have tried to make electoral hay with proposals for greater citizen involvement. Another fascinating case that Davidson-Schmich comparatively analyses is the implementation of Germany's same-sex partnership framework law that all sixteen constituent states had to undertake in 2001. Again, despite apparently lower rates of toleration for homosexual civil unions in the East, differences in implementation reflected only the partisan composition of governments and the imperatives of party discipline in both parts of the Federal Republic.

The primary interest of Davidson-Schmich's book lies less in its findings—representative partisan democracy's overwhelming constraints on individual politicians' choice should come as no surprise to observers of German and European politics—than in its systematic exposition of the timing, process and effectiveness of party disciplining. Davidson-Schmich's case is water tight. Still, she might have drawn even more detail and depth from her interviews with eastern legislators, especially since she sets up the alternative, "sociological" explanation of legislators' behavior as a bit of a straw man. Except for the school defenders of mechanistic socialization theory (or what Jeffrey Pollack has termed the widespread western thesis of the *sozialisationsbeschädigten* Osis), no sociological or cultural analyst of eastern German politics would contest the fact that the logics and incentives of imported western institutions have altered radically eastern Germans' political, social, and economic behavior. The interesting question is *how* and *whether* eastern values have been changed by, or perhaps have inflected, western norms. It is particularly ironic that Davidson-Schmich is so quick to dismiss more subtle eastern continuities and specificities since throughout her book she describes the old—and now new—Federal Republic as a "party state" but never once mentions that eastern Germans were masters at following—and manipulating—the powerful institutional incentives of their own party-state.

Frank Biess, *Postwar Germany*

Reviewed by

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