



Germany's Tea Party Troubles

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Arriving only in Berlin a few days after yet another political shock to the German body politic, I was struck by several things during my brief visit. The weather was beautiful, as was the city, which I last visited nine years ago. I missed the BMW Marathon by a day, but managed to partake of the festive atmosphere in and around the Brandenburg Gate.

I was there for a conference convened by the German Marshall Fund that explored the various ways that Europe, especially southern Europe, is coming to grips with the evolving security environment. The threats emanating from across the Mediterranean and the Levant are quite different from those posed by Russia in the east, or by the Soviet Union in an earlier era.

Governments have better tools for dealing with state-based threats, the traditional work of diplomacy. They are struggling to cope with the influx of large number of refugees and migrants fleeing the long-running aftermath of the Arab Spring. And a number of right-wing parties have tapped into this anti-immigrant sentiment elsewhere in Europe, including France, Hungary, Austria and the UK.

This was also on display in Berlin. Among the campaign posters hanging from the light posts, one reads, "They all bring terrorism to Europe, and we are their worst nightmare." All of the major parties are listed, as well as several of the minor ones, plus a few liberal foundations thrown in for good measure. The nice gentleman in the hotel lobby who translated for me described it as an advertisement by neo-Nazis hoping to sow fear in German hearts.

In the regional elections concluded a week ago here, German chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) garnered 17.6 percent of the vote, its worst ever showing in the German capital, and six points behind 2011. Its rival and partner in government, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), secured the most votes, at 21.6 percent, but that was down nearly 7 percent from five years ago. The two major parties are unpopular for a variety of reasons, including the failure to complete a long-delayed and grossly over-budget airport. Berlin's Tegel (TXL) is generally regarded as one of the worst in western Europe—meaning it has all the character of a Kennedy or LaGuardia here in the United States.

But the major parties' poor showing isn't limited to Berlin. Merkel's CDU has suffered in other recent regional elections, coming in third place behind the SPD and the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Mecklenburg–West Pomerania on September 4. In Berlin, AfD won 14 percent of the vote, below its 20 percent goal, but enough to win additional seats in the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament that represents the federal states. It will now have, with its showing in Berlin, representation in ten of sixteen regional assemblies.

AfD's main message has subtly shifted since it first emerged a few years ago. It began by emphasizing economic issues, tapping into widespread public anger surrounding the euro crisis and the Greek bailout. More recently, it has highlighted the anxiety caused by the influx of refugees and migrants fleeing the chaos in North Africa, Syria and Iraq.

In this respect, there are some parallels to the Tea Party movement in the United States. Originally mobilized by citizens incensed by Washington's bailout of financial institutions and general anxiety over rising government debt, some elements of the Tea Party boosted Donald Trump during the course of the Republican primaries. The "throw the bums out" mentality worked to Trump's advantage, as the other major candidates, including three sitting U.S. senators, struggled to match his anti-establishment rhetoric.

Trump now pays little attention to the Tea Party's earlier themes of fiscal discipline and smaller government, and focuses instead on the anti-immigrant and anti-globalization sentiment powering rejectionist parties throughout the West. Indeed, Trump's remedies for these supposed ills could include a dramatic expansion of state power, such as a massive increase in the number of immigration-enforcement agents.

Perhaps because The Donald's business fortunes have been at least as much helped as hurt by global trade, including the movement of peoples across borders (how many of the cooks, maids, dishwashers and bellmen toiling in his hotels are native-born?), he focuses less on the fear of economic dislocation and more on the physical threat that they supposedly pose to the United States. Donald Trump Jr.'s infamous Skittles comment is merely the latest manifestation of this sentiment.

But, contrary to Trump *père et fils*, excluding vast numbers of immigrants, out of fear that a small number might pose a threat, would impose severe costs on the U.S. economy. In addition to the enforcement costs—the massive deportation force alluded to above—there is the real danger that the anti-immigrant mood would turn away some of the very people that have made the United States the wealthiest and most innovative and productive on the planet. The *New York Times*' Roger Cohen is particularly eloquent on this score.

Meanwhile, the danger posed by immigrants and refugees is grossly overstated, as is the supposed harm that they cause to the wages of low-skilled workers (according to OTB).

But the anti-globalization, anti-immigrant tide is unlikely to recede on the basis of a careful examination of the facts. It is stoked by deep-seated fears about national identity, and sustained by emotional appeals, not rational ones. And, as I saw firsthand here in Germany, it isn't a solely American phenomenon.

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