



The CDU Is the Largest Party – So What?

by André Nilsen

In the debacle following the recent elections in Germany it has frequently been asserted by CDU politicians that they have the right to name the chancellor and form a new government because they ended up as the largest party in the new Bundestag.

The underlying reasoning has even implicitly been accepted by the SPD through their ill-fated

‘smoke and mirror’ attempt to conjure up the illusion that it is the SPD that is the largest party in the new Bundestag by suddenly treating the CDU and CSU as two independent parties.

The idea that it is the largest party that has the right to name the prime minister and form a new government is however not supported by any common understanding of

MAIN POINTS

According to parliamentary convention it is not the largest party but the party that can command the support of a majority of the parliament that has the right to name the prime minister and form a government. In the post-election malaise in Germany the initiative therefore rests with the SPD.

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parliamentarism. According to Western European parliamentary tradition it is not the largest party but rather the party that can command the support of a majority of the parliament that has this right.

Since the majority of the new Bundestag is centre-left this means that it is the SPD as the largest party on this side of the parliament which has the a priori right to attempt to name the chancellor and form a new government. It is only if the centre-left is too divided to be able to agree to provide stable majority support to the proposed chancellor and government that the SPD would forfeit this right to the CDU.

The current confusion has probably arisen since in the past the largest party has generally also been the party that could command the support of a majority of the parliament. As the number of parties in the Bundestag has grown and the fragmentation of the party system has increased this coincidence is however no longer as likely to be the case.

And if it is not the case as in the current situation there can be no doubt that it is the party that is best placed to command the support of a majority of the parliament rather than the largest party that

has the right to take the initiative to name the chancellor and form a new government.

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