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Berlin's election

Arrr, mein hearties!

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KLAUS WOWEREIT, a Social Democrat, was re-elected Berlin's mayor yesterday, but the real story is what happened to two opposition parties.

The liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), the junior partner in Angela Merkel's coalition government at the national level, won a dismal 1.8% of the vote and disappeared from the city's legislature. The Pirate Party, dedicated (awkwardly) to free information and rigid privacy protection, won nearly 9% and enters a German state parliament for the first time (Berlin is a city with the status of a state).



This is one of those what-does-it-all-mean moments. An established party like the FDP has the stuffing knocked out of it. Its place has been taken by a party that seems to have been dreamt up over a few beers (originally in Sweden). The Pirates' top candidate, Andreas Baum, recently estimated Berlin's debt at "many, many millions." Technically that's not wrong; the city owes €64 billion (\$88 billion). But it was clear enough that he had no idea.

Should people worry that so many (mostly young) Berliners voted for a party that seems more playful than anything else? That they are voting, and thus implicitly endorsing representative democracy, is presumably a good sign. The mood at the Pirates' post-election party, in a regulation-cool nightspot, was mellow rather than aggressive.

"If we wanted a revolution we'd stand on the streets and scream," said one partier. There was plenty of disillusionment with the established parties, including the Greens, who 30 years ago were as obstreperous as the Pirates. But there was also a sense that the Pirates' real mission was to spread their message, in part to other parties, and ultimately to disappear as a political force. "No one wants to be a politician," was a common refrain.

The message has mainly to do with transparency in government (the Pirates are exercised about secrecy surrounding some water-privatisation contracts) and more direct participation in decision-making by citizens. They endorse "liquid democracy", a web-based form of proxy voting that lets people decide at any time who they want to represent them on various issues. Their success is part of a broader German trend—spearheaded largely by the Greens—to find new ways of enlisting citizens' participation in governance.

The Pirates did well partly because the Greens campaigned badly (although they saw their share of the vote rise). But there is a troubling side to the Pirates' success in making the Greens look stodgy. The Greens have been toiling for decades to change Germany, and have been moving

closer to centres of power (in May they won elections in industrial [Baden-Württemberg](http://www.economist.com/node/18485945) (<http://www.economist.com/node/18485945>), taking control of a state government for the first time). Must power and its compromises disqualify parties like the Greens in the eyes of young voters?

As for the FDP, it has been sliding in the polls ever since it won a record share of the vote in the 2009 federal election. Its small-government, low-tax philosophy is a minority taste, but even voters who share it have been alienated by the party's erratic attempts to put it into practice. Last week the party's newish chairman, Philipp Rösler, the economy minister, tried to tap into Germans' growing anxieties about the euro by suggesting that a default by Greece was not unthinkable. This unsettled the financial markets but did the party no good. Its humiliation in Berlin was the latest in a series in regional elections this year.

On balance, this is good news for the markets. If the FDP's Eurosceptic-lite tactic had worked, that would have fed its growing resistance to measures Mrs Merkel has endorsed to shore up the euro. The government is confident that it has the votes in the Bundestag to authorise German backing for the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), a bail-out fund, on September 29th.

Rebels within the FDP are circulating a petition among members seeking to block ratification of the EFSF's permanent successor, the European Stability Mechanism, early next year. But Dr Rösler and other FDP leaders, who are not euro-populists despite their musings on Greece's solvency, are expected to resist this.

Though the press is speculating that the government could break up over the euro, Mrs Merkel intends to soldier on until September 2013, when the next federal elections are due. Her chances of doing so probably improved yesterday. Having lost successive state elections, the FDP is unlikely to risk another at national level.

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