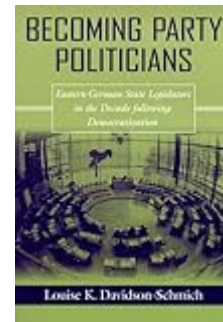


Louise K. Davidson-Schmich. *Becoming Party Politicians: Eastern German State Legislators in the Decade following Democratization.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. xvii + 212 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02585-4.



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Eastern German State Legislators and the Party State in Post-Unification Germany

The author has used a series of interviews with state legislators in both eastern and western states in Germany between 1990 and 2002, as well as the transcripts of parliamentary debates, to establish the extent to which eastern legislators differ in their political behavior. As a starting point she summarizes the conventional wisdom that the values and attitudes of eastern politicians were, and in some instances still are, different from those of their western counterparts, but then she demonstrates that the structures of the German party state have resulted in eastern politicians' political behavior growing closer to that of their western counterparts over the decade after unification.

The evidence that the author presents is certainly convincing: eastern legislators tend(ed) to be more skeptical of political parties, were more interested in nonpartisan decision-making, favored a growth in direct democracy, and tended to be more politically intolerant in their attitudes towards unpopular social groups. Yet, when it came to political behavior in the context of their parliamentary work, the pull of party discipline and partisan behavior became ever stronger. By the end of the

decade they came to resemble the political behavior of their western counterparts more closely. The collapse of citizens' groups as a political force in the GDR in the early part of 1990, symbolized by their poor showing in the People's Chamber election of March 1990, their subsequent difficult political alliance with the western Greens in the first all-German national election, and their ultimate submersion, meant that anybody who wanted to make a serious attempt to become a political representative had to accept the dominance of the western parties and their structures in the German party state. The only alternative was to seek election through the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which for many was totally unacceptable, although possibly more acceptable now since its merger with the Wahlalternative für Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit (WASG). Political office represented a career path for ambitious, talented easterners in an unpromising economic environment.

The author demonstrates effectively that this adaptation to the requirements of the western party model, which demanded political behavior that often ran counter to their personal values and attitudes, has led to

a growing gap between political representatives in eastern Germany and mass opinion. Although skepticism about the political process has grown in western Germany, disillusionment with the ability of this system to deliver democratic outcomes that provide positive solutions to deficiencies in economic and social life has grown even more strongly in the former eastern states. This tendency has been evidenced by the constant drop in electoral turnout, especially in state elections. In her conclusion, the author raises the question of whether this growing gap between mass opinion and state legislators in eastern Germany is storing up trouble for the political system in Germany in the future.

Some chapters in the book are more interesting than others. Chapter 4 shows how eastern legislators' instinctive preference for more direct democracy in the form of referenda was overridden by the requirements of party discipline when in government. While eastern state constitutions, in contrast to western constitutions, make greater provision for direct democracy, in practice state governments prefer to keep decision-making powers in their own hands, while opposition parties maintain their support for direct democracy. Chapter 5 deals with the same-sex partnership law and shows that the higher degree of intolerance towards homosexuality in the new

states is overridden by the institutional demands of national legislation and the resulting partisan nature of political decision-making. So the essential argument of the book is well supported by the evidence presented by the author.

One slight weakness in the structures of the interviews was that there were fewer interviews with PDS state legislators (3) than, for example, with the extreme right-wing Deutsche Volksunion (DVU) (5). I would have thought that the strength of the PDS in the eastern states would have required a broader range of interviews with PDS members. The book came out before the development of the PDS into a national party through its merger with the WASG, and it will be interesting to see whether this change in status has an effect on the behavior of state legislators from that part of the political spectrum. The evidence so far from Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is that even PDS legislators adapt to institutional norms and override often passionately held political views about the economy and social questions. But overall the book provides an important contribution to our understanding about how the transfer of the western party system to eastern Germany has developed since 1990.

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