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Bonn's Governing Center Held Despite Its Setback

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — West German voters delivered a vexing paradox last month. Helmut Kohl's center-right coalition was returned by a comfortable margin, but its victory was soured by a staggering drop of 4.5 percentage points, the Conservatives' worst showing since West Germany's first free election in 1949. The anti-nuclear and anti-NATO Greens, who seemed like a flash in the pan four years ago, gained 2.7 points.

West Germans had enjoyed an ultrastable political system for decades. Fringe parties on the right and on the left had disappeared one by one, leaving a vast and sluggish oligopoly of three: the Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party; the Social Democrats; the smallish Free Democrats. Tenure had been changing hands at a glacial pace. For the first 20 years, the Conservatives were in power. Then it was the turn of the Social Democrats with Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt governing for 13 years. In 1982 the Christian Democrats returned to Bonn, where they expect to remain until 1991.

But now, for the first time since World War II, an election has weakened both of the large parties simultaneously. And with the triumphant Greens safely ensconced at the national level, the voice of fundamentalist protest has been institutionalized.

Then there is the "greening" of the Social Dem-

ocrats. Once the party of the working class, they continue to drift leftward, ever more critical of the Western alliance, America and industrial growth. The day after the election, the Social Democrats virtually dumped their candidate, Johannes Rau, the last heavyweight of the Helmut Schmidt wing of the party. The premier of Saarland, Oskar Lafontaine, a man of considerable demagogical talent and of convictions that are hard to distinguish from those of the Greens, appears likely to become the new standard bearer.

Finally, the Greens look like the party of the future. One-fifth of the 18-to-21-year-olds voted Green this time, as did the politically vocal, university educated up to age 35.

Will Social Democrats and Greens emerge as victors four years hence? That is not likely. First, the numbers are not right. Together the Social Democrats and the Greens won 45.3 percent of the last vote — which is still less than what the Social Democrats gained in 1972, when they made their best showing ever with 45.8 percent.

The lesson of these statistics is plain: The two parties do not add up, but tend to subtract from each other. That is what happened in the 1987

campaign: As the Social Democrats moved left, they lost more votes in the center than they sopped up in Green pastures. Also, as Green voters grow past 35, they tend to reconsider their tastes.

Though that lesson has not sunk in, it will eventually. Elections in West Germany have never been won on the fringes. Nor is it so easy to collaborate with radical parties. In Hesse, the first ever coalition between Social Democrats and Greens broke up recently over a comparatively trivial issue: a nuclear fuel plant that the Greens wanted to close down after 12 years of operation.

Humiliating as it was for Helmut Kohl, the 1987 verdict does not presage the speedy demise of the center-right coalition. In large part, Chancellor Kohl "lost" because at least three-quarters of those polled knew that he would win. That was why these elections were notable for an abnormally low turnout. And many of those who did cast their ballots in favor of the extremes knew that protest came cheap, like a flirtation without consequences. Non-critical elections make for "deviant" behavior. The political center in West Germany has held, once more.

The writer is foreign editor of Süddeutsche Zeitung. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.