
People do v

By JOSEF JOFFE

MUNICH, West Germany — Helmut Kohl, the West German chancellor, likes to sell himself short. "You know," he often says with mock modesty, "I make a living out of being underestimated." On Sunday, he did it again, and in a big way that is going to shape Central European history for years to come.

On Sunday night, after the first free election in East Germany since the Nazis took over Germany 57 years ago, the pundits and pollsters had the usual egg on their faces, and Helmut Kohl was trying hard to hide the *schadenfreude* behind a statesmanlike pose.

In a stunning upset, echoing Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's surprise victory over the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the East German conservatives beat the heavily favored Social Democrats by a margin of 22 percentage points.

Technically, of course, the victor was not Mr. Kohl but the Alliance for Germany, which swept East Germany with 48 percent of the total vote. In practice, however, the three alliance parties were but stand-ins. They are virtual clones of Mr. Kohl's West German conservatives, and herein lies a tale rich with irony.

The first lesson is: don't trust the pollsters (or the press) with calling elections in countries emerging from the shadow of dictatorship. Having learned to distrust any stranger, East Germans (and Nicaraguans) were hardly prepared to bare their soul to foreigners with pen and pad in hand.

The second lesson is as old as the Bible: the first shall be the last, and vice-versa. When the Berlin Wall fell last November, it was the West German Social Democrats who grabbed the national flag and tried to run with it. They moved into East Germany with blitzkrieg speed, founding their own party, the S.P.D.-East, while all the others were still pondering how to deploy the fatherland forces east of the Ibe River.

Yet, the East German Social Democrats emerged with a bare 22 percent of the vote — a humiliating setback from the 50 percent-plus they and almost everybody else had originally expected. And herein lies the third and most important lesson of the East German voting: economics is more important than nationalism or ideology.

ote their pocketbooks

After 57 years of ideological overkill — first of the Nazi, then of the Communist variety — the East Germans behaved like any “normal” democratic electorate: they voted their pocketbook. While the Social Democrats, after their initial rush to reunification, were beginning to show hangover symptoms and to counsel caution, the conservatives played the nationalist card with a vengeance.

Yet, the nationalist message of the conservatives read not so much Deutschland uber alles as Deutschemark uber alles. Mr. Kohl and cohorts stood for rapid reunification, and that spelled the fastest possible access to the fleshpots of West German capitalism.

In short, Kohl equaled Kohle, which is German slang for “money,” and that, rather than the old-time religion of nationalism, carried the day. Conversely, the Social Democratic left got trounced because its message of national unity (a.k.a., shared riches), proclaimed so loudly in December, became ever fainter as the campaign progressed.

Call the East Germans “mature” or “opportunistic” — the fact is that both parts of Germany will now be governed by conservative

coalitions with a yen for unity, and that will once more accelerate the calendar of European politics. A Social Democratic victory in East Germany, meaning slow and controlled fusion with the Federal Republic, was the last hope of those who fear a German steamroller in the heart of Europe.

Now, even diehards like Britain's Margaret Thatcher are dispatching warm congratulations to Helmut Kohl, the real victor. The Russians, too, must have taken note of Sunday's earthquake. After this massive vote in favor of one Germany, their position in East German, has become even more untenable. What do you do with 380,000 crack troops if you have the entire country against you?

Helmut Kohl has emerged with a loud mandate for reunification. May he use it wisely, for we are now back to the oldest problem of modern European history: how to balance German national aspirations against the claims of European stability.

Josef Joffe is foreign editor and columnist of the Suddeutsche Zeitung, a daily newspaper in the Federal Republic of Germany.

