German parliamentary elections 2009
from the viewpoint of direct democracy

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Abstract The mathematical theory of democracy is applied to analyze the German Bundestag elections 2009 and to evaluate five German leading parties and their coalitions from the viewpoint of direct democracy. For this purpose, the positions of the parties on over 30 topical issues are compared with results of public opinion polls. The outcomes are summarized in the party indices of popularity (the average percentage of the population represented) and universality (frequency of representing a majority). It is shown that the election winner 2009, the conservative party CDU/CSU, has a quite low representativeness (ranked fourth), whereas the most representative is the left party die Linke which received only 11.9% votes. It is concluded that voters are not very consistent with their own political profiles, disregard party manifestos, and are likely driven by political traditions, even if outdated, or by personal images of politicians. To bridge approaches of representative and direct democracy, some modifications to the election procedure are proposed, which, among other things, complicate vote manipulations.

1 Introduction

The difference between direct democracy and representative democracy is in the way sovereignty is exercised—by the assembly of all citizens, or by elected representatives. Direct democracy, called also pure democracy, is generally regarded as the most advanced form of democracy. Respectively, representative democracies sometimes
practice elements of direct democracy—referenda (plebiscites)—on most important political issues.¹

Shortcomings of representative democracy are caused by some particularities of voting, and by intermediation of voters’ will by representatives. For instance, the bottle-necks of simple majority voting are so critical that the legitimacy of election results can be put in question (Held 1996; Samons 2004). As noticed by Borda as early as in 1770, if no candidate got an absolute majority then the election winner could be most undesirable for an absolute majority. He illustrated it with an example of 21 voters with the rankings of three candidates A, B, and C shown in Fig. 1 (Black 1958, p. 157). Indeed, the election winner candidate A with 8 votes is the most undesirable for 13 voters of 21.

In similar cases, more information than just the first choices should be considered: candidate rankings (preferences of electors with second and third priorities), preference grades, quantitative estimations, etc. However, these methods either have questionable assumptions, or can result in cyclic orders of candidates. Related problems are studied in the theory of voting and social choice since the eighteenth century, however, with no unambiguous solution. The general theoretical conclusion is that no voting rule is perfect. It is proved that every voting rule has its limits, in other words, its ‘good’ performance is restricted to certain situations (Mueller 1989).

The imperfectness of intermediation of voters’ will is to a great extent caused by the irrationality of voters themselves.² They are often influenced by a priori judgements or pay attention to the image of candidates rather than to real merits. At the business level, some corporations try to overcome subjectivity and irrelevances in evaluation of candidates in recruitment procedures by considering exclusively job-related matters and anonymous questionnaires with no names, photos, or any personal information; see Krause et al. (2010, pp. 8–21) for an international survey. This practice is becoming more widespread, and Germany has started to shape it into legal guide-lines (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2010).

The present paper discusses these two shortcomings of representative democracy, referring to the German Bundestag elections held on September 27, 2009 (Bundeswahlleiter 2009) with the results displayed in Table 1. Firstly, since no party got an absolute majority, the question emerges if the election winner CDU/CSU and the currently governing coalition CDU/CSU/FDP are as desired by the population as prompted by the election outcomes.

¹ Some authors argue that the label “representative democracy” is misleading, prompting that direct democracy and representative democracy are two forms of democracy, whereas the latter is not democracy at all but a system with “representative government” (Manin 1997). The emerging “representocracy” has own virtues, and its popular nature is rather conditional.

² The apparently contradictory behavior of voters is also explained by the existence of issues beyond the political agenda, like ideological, religious, ethnical, traditional, or cultural reasons; see Roemer (1998).