

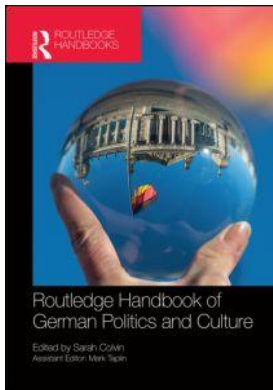
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### **Party politics and electoral behaviour**

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# Party politics and electoral behaviour

*Thomas Saalfeld and Harald Schoen*

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A political party can be defined as ‘any group, however loosely organised, seeking to elect governmental officeholders under a given label’ (Epstein 1979: 9). Building on Key’s (1964: 164) fundamental distinction and Katz’s and Mair’s (2002: 113) modifications, this chapter describes and analyses the interaction of German voters and party elites at three distinct levels: the ‘party-in-the-electorate’, the ‘party-in-the-government’ (Key) or ‘party in public office’ (as Katz and Mair put it), and the party organisation outside the legislature, particularly the ‘party on the ground’ (Katz and Mair 2002). Our analysis focuses on individual parties and also covers the party system as ‘the *system of interactions* resulting from inter-party competition’ (Sartori 1976: 44, emphasis in the original). We will aim to track important continuities in, and changes to, voting behaviour in respect of the main German parties individually and of the party system as a whole, concentrating on the period since unification in 1990. Drawing on a number of theoretical perspectives, including theories of electoral change, theories of organisational reform in political parties (in response to electoral change), and coalition politics at the governmental level, we will develop our argument as follows: after introducing the main parties and analysing continuities and change in voting behaviour and party membership, we will analyse how political parties have responded to the growing levels of political uncertainty in organisational terms and will seek to address the seemingly paradoxical question why Germany’s party system has remained relatively stable at the governmental level (the party in public office), while parties in the electorate and parties as organisations have become far more fluid and vulnerable. (On the electoral system in Germany, including proportional representation and the statutory minimum of 5 per cent of the national vote a party should achieve to be represented in the Bundestag, see Chapter 6.)

## ‘Dramatis Personae’: the parties

Six parties were represented in the German parliament or Bundestag between the first election after unification and the general election of 2013. They are the main ‘actors’ on the stage of the Bundestag. We will briefly characterise the main parties and their challengers, starting with the parties of the centre-right and right (for some further short portraits and further information see Hornsteiner and Saalfeld 2014).

The leading parties on the centre-right are the *Christian Democrats*, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and the CSU (Christian Socialist Union), the CDU's sister party in the Federal state of Bavaria. Both parties have been consistent advocates of the German model of a social market economy (see Chapters 5 and 22) and of Germany's membership of NATO, and have shown a commitment to the process of European integration. Business friendly in their economic policies, they have always had an organised trade union wing amongst their membership. The ideological differences between the two parties are small, although the Bavarian CSU has always tended to be slightly more conservative on law and order and issues of social morality (Bräuninger and Debus 2012). Both parties draw their electoral support from across the entire spectrum of the citizenry, with a certain overrepresentation amongst practising Christians and middle-class voters. The sister parties have led national governments between 1949 and 1969, between 1982 and 1998, and from 2005 to the present day.

For much of the time between 1949 and 2013, the liberal *Free Democratic Party* (FDP) was the CDU/CSU's 'natural' partner in government coalitions. Exceptionally, between 1969 and 1982, the Liberals formed a coalition with the SPD and positioned themselves as a pivotal party between the two major parties (Pappi 1984). Ideologically, the FDP has always been a strong advocate of free enterprise and small government. From the late 1960s and early 1970s, it also became a party strongly associated with the process of détente and reconciliation with Germany's central and eastern European neighbours. But with 4.8 per cent in the 2013 election, it failed to reach the statutory minimum of 5 per cent of the national vote necessary to be represented in the Bundestag. For the first time since 1949, the FDP was not represented in parliament.

In 2013 the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) emerged as a competitor to the centre-right parties. It was founded in February 2013 by a group of disaffected CDU members critical of the party leadership's policy during the eurozone crisis, a policy that was broadly supported by all Bundestag parties except The Left (Die Linke, see below). The core demand in the AfD's 2013 manifesto was Germany's withdrawal from the euro and a return to national currencies. Other policy areas were less developed. In the election of 2013, the AfD narrowly failed to achieve the 5 per cent threshold, winning 4.7 per cent of the national vote. This was a remarkable result only months after its establishment. The party's support was particularly strong in the eastern German states, where it gained support from around 5.8 per cent of voters.

The *Social Democratic Party* (SPD) has since 1949 been the largest party left of the political centre. It has a social democratic programme that accepts the social market economy but simultaneously advocates an active role for the government to ensure a degree of social equality and cohesion. It has participated in coalition governments with the CDU/CSU, in 1966–9, in 2005–09, and since 2013; with the FDP, in 1969–82; and with the Greens, in 1998–2005. The 1998–2005 SPD–Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder initiated major reforms to labour market policy, social benefits, and pensions, which were deeply unpopular with some of the party's activists and core voters and severely depressed electoral support after 2005.

The *Green Party* was founded in the 1970s as a broad and relatively disparate coalition of pacifists, environmentalists, feminists, left-libertarians, and other social movement organisations. It developed into a modern democratic centre-left party with a strong focus on questions of environmental policy. In the 1983 Bundestag election, it polled more than 5 per cent of the vote for the first time and has been represented in the Bundestag ever since. At the national level, the Greens governed in a coalition with the SPD between 1998 and 2005. Very much an outsider during the 1980s and much of the 1990s, the party is now seen as a potential coalition partner for both the SPD and the CDU/CSU at the national as well as the regional and municipal levels. Its coalition formed with the CDU in Hesse in December 2013 is seen as a strong indication of the Greens expanding their strategic options, also at the national level.

*The Left* (Die Linke) was established in 2007 through a merger of The Left Party/PDS (Linkspartei.PDS), formerly the Party of Democratic Socialism (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus, PDS), and the Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice (WASG). The PDS had been the successor organisation of the SED (Socialist Unity Party), the ruling party in the German Democratic Republic, which was disbanded in 1989–90.<sup>1</sup> The WASG was a party founded by trade unionists and former Social Democrats in January 2005 in opposition to Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's reforms to labour market policy, unemployment benefit, social insurance, and pensions, known as the Hartz IV reforms. The merger to form The Left did not resolve intra-party tensions between pragmatic factions (mostly from the east) and more radical factions (mostly from the west).

### The 'audience': voting behaviour in unified Germany

Sticking to our metaphor of a theatrical performance, the voters may be seen as the audience choosing their favourite act at the end of a show. The behaviour of voters has undergone significant changes since German unification in 1990. These changes concern their participation, the way they make their choices, and the social and political drivers underpinning their choices. It has proven useful to conceive of vote choice as resulting from the interplay of voter attitudes and expectations on the one hand, and the choices offered by political parties on the other (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Key 1966). As far as the voters are concerned, short-term, occasionally quite fickle forces affecting choices at the ballot box can be distinguished from more stable longer-term forces. The former include evaluations of the political leaders and issues of the day. The latter include relatively stable psychological attachments to political parties that operate like a psychological and cognitive 'filter' affecting short-term attitudes and political behaviour in favour of a party (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Bartels 2002; Lodge and Taber 2013). In addition, voters' general policy preferences tend to be more stable and less dependent on short-term factors. While long-term factors lend stability to political attitudes and behaviour, short-term factors such as changing candidates, new policy proposals, and issues on which parties focus in their electoral campaigns account for changes in vote choice. Campaigns define the menu from which voters, relying on long- and short-term attitudes, choose. In this sense, 'the voice of the people is but an echo', as V.O. Key (1966: 2) famously put it.

German unification led to significant changes in both longer-term and short-term factors. Some of the short-term factors are easy to identify: unification transformed the policy agenda, and a whole array of new policy problems affected the responses of political parties not only in the domestic arena (the question of re-integrating the eastern states economically and socially, for example) but also in Germany's international environment. In addition, research has identified changes in the longer-term factors. These changes had started before unification but were accelerated by it. Long-standing partisan attachments, often rooted in the voters' social backgrounds and in traditional social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), had started to decline in western Germany since the late 1970s. Like other advanced democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), West Germany had begun to experience a process of partisan dealignment before unification. Aggregate levels of partisan attachment were reduced further by the fact that former East Germans were less likely to identify with political parties due to their own experience with the notion of 'party' during the SED's dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) between 1949 and 1989 and their lack of attachment to the essentially western German parties dominating electoral politics after unification. Thus, unification increased the overall proportion of independents in the German electorate, although even today a majority of German voters hold partisan loyalties (Schoen and Weins 2005; Arzheimer 2006). Independent

voters are more likely to abstain in elections, to make up their minds late in the election campaigns, and to switch parties from one election to the next. As the potential for electoral volatility has increased, party leaders have had stronger incentives to be responsive to voter demands and to compete for votes more intensely than in the past, when they could rely on a larger proportion of loyal core voters. Moreover, the electorate has become more heterogeneous in terms of the range of policy preferences. East Germans differ from West Germans in their values and policy orientations. As some kind of legacy, pro-socialist preferences are more pronounced and pro-Western views in foreign policy less pronounced in the east (Arzheimer and Falter 2013). In short, unification has thoroughly reshaped the environment for electoral competition.

As the top row in Table 7.1 records, electoral turnout rates varied between approximately 70 and 80 per cent between 1990 and 2013. The bottom part of Table 7.1 reveals some crucial west–east differences. The penultimate line demonstrates that turnout rates in the west have exceeded those in the east (the so-called *neue Bundesländer* or new Federal states) by between 3 and 8 percentage points in each election since 1990. This difference is likely to reflect the aforementioned differences in political predispositions. Irrespective of geographic differences, turnout in Federal elections has declined across the entire country since the early 1990s. Whereas turnout rates approached 80 per cent until 2005, they dropped to roughly 70 per cent in the 2009 and 2013 general elections. Not only have turnout rates varied between western and eastern Germany, the drop has been particularly pronounced in certain sociodemographic groups, that is, amongst low-status and poorly educated citizens (Schäfer 2011). Although German turnout rates are still not lower than those in comparable European democracies (Mair 2002; Steinbrecher *et al.* 2007), the development has led some scholars to consider compulsory voting (Schäfer 2011).

Eastern and western Germany differ not only in turnout, but also in terms of election outcomes. The bottom row of Table 7.1 shows the substantial west–east differences in party

Table 7.1 Results of the German federal elections, 1990–2013

	1990	1994	1998	2002	2005	2009	2013
Turnout (per cent)	77.8	79.0	82.2	79.1	77.7	70.8	71.5
CDU/CSU	43.8	41.4	35.1	38.5	35.2	33.8	41.5
SPD	33.5	36.4	40.9	38.5	34.2	23.0	25.7
FDP	11.0	6.9	6.2	7.4	9.8	14.6	4.8
Linke/PDS	2.4	4.4	5.1	4.0	8.7	11.9	8.6
Greens	5.1	7.3	6.7	8.6	8.1	10.7	8.4
AfD	–	–	–	–	–	–	4.7
Other	4.3	3.6	5.9	3.0	4.0	6.0	6.3
Volatility*	–	7.2	7.6	6.5	8.1	12.6	15.4
Fractionalisation**	0.32	0.32	0.30	0.31	0.27	0.22	0.26
<i>West-East Differences</i>							
Turnout***	4.1	7.9	2.8	7.8	4.2	7.5	4.8
Party shares****	14.5	18.8	23.8	18.4	22.7	20.5	19.8

\* Volatility is the sum of differences in party shares between elections in  $t$  and  $t+1$ . To avoid counting shifts in electoral support twice the sum is divided by two (Pedersen 1979).

\*\* Fractionalisation is the sum of the squared party shares in a given election (Laakso and Taagepera 1979).

\*\*\* This difference is calculated by subtracting east German turnout from west German turnout.

\*\*\*\* The difference in party shares is calculated analogously to electoral volatility.

Note: Treating smaller parties as the single category ‘others’ in the table above leads to conservative estimates of volatility, fractionalisation, and regional differences.

shares. Remarkably, this difference has not begun to decrease since 1990, reflecting, first and foremost, the much larger electoral support for the PDS (until 2005), The Left Party/PDS (2005–07), and its successor, The Left (since 2007), in eastern Germany. This east–west difference was not diminished after The Left Party/PDS’s merger with the WASG (Schoen and Falter 2005). As a kind of mirror image of the strong electoral performance of The Left and its predecessor parties in the east, the remaining main parties have, in most elections, been considerably more successful in western Germany.

Before 1983, Germany’s party system was often described as a ‘two-and-a-half party system’. When the Greens overcame the 5 per cent threshold for the first time in 1983, the system was referred to as a ‘two-block system’ with the CDU/CSU and the FDP to the right of the political centre and the SPD and Greens to its left (Saalfeld 2005). The underlying trend towards a more fractionalised party system has become more pronounced since 2000 (e.g. Niedermayer 2011) and can be tracked in the results for the political parties in general elections (table 7.1). In the three general elections of the 1990s, at least one of the two major parties, the CDU/CSU or the SPD, gained more than 40 per cent of the votes. Between them, the two major parties tended to attract some 75 to 80 per cent. The three smaller parties represented in the Bundestag – the FDP, the Greens, and the PDS – received some 15 to 20 per cent in aggregate. In the three general elections after 2000, electoral support for the CDU/CSU and SPD dropped considerably. In 2005 their combined vote amounted to less than 70 per cent. In 2009 it dropped to less than 57 per cent. Electoral support for the Social Democrats eroded precipitously from some 40 per cent in 1998 to approximately 25 per cent in 2009 and 2013. There is now an asymmetry between the SPD and the CDU/CSU, as the latter appears to have recovered, at least momentarily, from its previous electoral decline.

While support for the traditional catch-all parties declined, the proportion of votes cast for smaller parties increased. In the 2005 and 2009 elections, the electoral strength of the three small parties in the Bundestag increased by sizeable margins. In the 2013 election, the trend towards increased electoral fractionalisation continued as the new, anti-euro party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) narrowly failed to achieve the 5 per cent minimum. These changes in voting behaviour have had considerable effects on the process of government formation. Since 2005 the traditional two-party coalitions consisting of one of the major and one of the smaller parties have become difficult or even impossible to form. Between 2005 and 2009 and since 2013, so-called ‘grand coalitions’ of the two major parties have formed the government, an arrangement that was previously a rarity (between 1949 and 2005 a ‘grand coalition’ had only once been created in the Federal Republic, in 1966–9). In addition, parties have begun to consider hitherto unusual three-party coalitions, some of which (e.g. coalitions of the Christian Democrats and Greens) would cross the traditional boundaries between the centre-left and centre-right ‘camps’.

This trend towards a more fractionalised party system at the electoral level has been accompanied by a considerable, and increasing, level of electoral volatility. Volatility can be measured at the aggregate level of the party system as an index (the Pedersen index, named after its creator, Mogens Pedersen; see Pedersen 1979) that sums up all gains and losses of the competing parties and divides this sum by two. It provides a rough indication of net changes in party strengths. Volatility can also be measured at the level of the individual voters, indicating how many voters switch their vote choice from one election to the next. In the 1990s, net aggregate volatility equalled approximately seven percentage points, indicating a relatively moderate electoral turnover from one election to the next. Between the elections of 2005 and 2009, however, aggregate volatility increased rapidly, and in 2013 it reached an all-time high unmatched since the founding period of the Federal Republic between 1949 and 1957. That means that the

result of an election can no longer be predicted from the result of preceding elections with the kind of accuracy that was possible for most elections after the late 1950s.

The increase in net aggregate volatility is accompanied by changes suggesting higher levels of inter-election volatility in individual-level voting behaviour. Whereas before 1990 only around 10 per cent of voters switched parties from one election to the next, the proportion of 'party switchers' increased to at least 30 per cent in the 2009 election (Schoen 2003: 130–51; Weßels 2011: 47). In addition, there is a considerable number of voters switching from abstention in one election to voting for a party in the next and then back to abstention (Rattinger and Schoen 2009). From this perspective, the low levels of turnout and the high levels of volatility in the 2009 and 2013 elections are correlated. It is worth noting that turnout is even lower and volatility considerably higher than at the Federal level when it comes to so-called 'second-order elections' at the regional, local, or European levels (Steinbrecher *et al.* 2007). In a nutshell, continuity in election outcomes in Germany has declined, leading to growing uncertainty for parties and regarding government formation.

And voters have become more volatile in the run-up to elections, although not to the same extent as previously thought (Plischke 2014). A considerable number of voters waver and change voting intentions during election campaigns. The share of voters who make their voting decision immediately before, or on, election day has increased, adding a degree of uncertainty to survey-based forecasts. At the same time as participation in elections has ceased to be considered a citizen's duty for many Germans, some voters not only consider a broader range of parties than in the past, but also waver between abstention and voting for a party. As a result, there is considerable potential for campaign efforts and unforeseen events during the campaigns to affect individual voting behaviour and election outcomes.

Increases in inter- and intra-election volatility sit well with the notion that (loosening) longer-term partisan ties have given way to an increasing influence of short-term factors. In an era of personalised campaigning and media attention, the increasing impact of variables capturing 'candidate orientations' on vote choice seems a plausible consequence. The evidence, however, is far from supporting this expectation unequivocally. To be sure, candidates play an important role in campaigns. The US-style televised debates between chancellor candidates that have featured in German election campaigns since 2002 are a case in point. Attitudes towards candidates (for the chancellorship) have certainly been shown to affect individual vote choice (Ohr *et al.* 2013; Wagner 2011); but the evidence suggests that the impact of candidate evaluations on individual-level vote choice and aggregate election outcomes is not overwhelming, and is by and large confined to independents (Brettschneider 2002; Ohr *et al.* 2013). What is more, there is little evidence of a steady increase in candidate effects in unified Germany. Rather, the evidence is more in line with the notion that the weight of voters' evaluations of candidates, and the impact of such evaluations on a party's success, varies in response to election-specific factors (Ohr *et al.* 2013; Schoen 2011).

Another hypothesis might be that voters' issue orientations (how they see the parties' positions and competencies on particular issues) are filling the void left by loosening partisan ties. Political issues and policy pledges (e.g. in party manifestos) play a considerable role in campaigns and do affect voting behaviour, whether for symbolic or for instrumental reasons (Sears *et al.* 1979). The election of 2002 provided some good illustrations of the potentially decisive role of certain policy issues. Schröder attracted many votes by having himself portrayed as an effective crisis manager following the Elbe flood disaster and by opposing the participation of German troops in the war against Iraq (Schoen 2004; Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011). In a negative effect, the liberal reforms of the German welfare state that Chancellor Schröder initiated after that election of 2002 led to the formation and electoral success of The Left Party (Schoen and Falter 2005).

This anti-welfare state reform is likely to have contributed to the electoral decline of the SPD since 2005. Despite anecdotal evidence, it cannot be taken for granted that even far-reaching policy changes play a role in voting behaviour, however. Two examples suffice to illustrate this point. Whereas German troops were not sent abroad for military missions before unification, unified Germany has witnessed considerable policy change in the field of military engagement e.g. participation in the war in Kosovo in 1999 and in the war in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 (see Chapters 25 and 26). Yet neither mission affected voting behaviour or election outcomes significantly (Schoen 2010, 2011). Moreover, as a member of the European Monetary Union (EMU), Germany replaced the German mark with the euro. Given the significance of the mark as a symbol of national pride, replacing the national currency with a common European currency could have been expected to be a vote loser. As a matter of fact, the replacement of the mark by the euro as well as the introduction of and major changes to the European Monetary Union affected voting behaviour and electoral outcomes in Federal and European elections moderately at most (see Pappi and Thurner 2000). The reason for these findings is simple: these policy changes had the support of all mainstream parties, meaning that voters had little choice on euro-related issues at election time. Nonetheless, the electoral success of The Left in response to Schröder's Hartz reforms and of the anti-euro AfD in 2013 suggests that there are limitations to a strategy of depoliticising important political issues. It remains to be seen whether this and other issues will affect vote choice in future elections.

Policy changes have also affected the relationship between voting behaviour and social divisions. Traditionally, the CDU/CSU was the choice of (Catholic) Christian voters whereas the SPD was the preferred party of (unionised) workers and the less well-to-do. The latter alignment has weakened over the years – and has now finally been transformed. In response to the Hartz reforms, The Left managed to gain increasing support amongst those social groups that were formerly core supporters of the SPD (Elff and Roßteutscher 2011). Although the electoral affinity of Christians and the CDU/CSU has turned out to be more robust, it also appears to respond to short-term factors such as candidates and policy decisions (Elff and Roßteutscher 2011). As a result, voting behaviour is still related to social divisions, but the nature of the relationship has changed. To a certain extent, traditional affinities have given way to new alliances (see also Müller and Klein 2012). With regard to social divisions and voting behaviour, short-term forces have become more important at the expense of long-term attachments, thereby rendering the relationship less robust and more vulnerable (Schoen 2005).

Given the trend towards a more fractionalised party system and more volatility, forming coalition governments after an election has become both riskier and more complicated for political parties. It is no longer guaranteed that traditional ideologically coherent two-party coalitions will be viable; and (unlike in Austria) grand coalitions are not considered acceptable over longer periods. So, parties (have to) consider new types of coalitions. For voters, it thus becomes less predictable which coalition government will be formed after an election and how their vote for a specific party may influence government formation. In effect, making electoral decisions is likely to become more complicated for voters because they may have to consider coalition preferences and the viability of various coalitions (Bytzek 2013). Moreover, if voters deliberately take coalitions into account when deciding for whom to vote, they may feel disappointed when parties form coalitions their voters do not like. As a result, the trend towards a more fractionalised party system has repercussions for individual-level voting behaviour and the interplay between parties and voters.

In sum, voting behaviour in unified Germany has undergone considerable changes. The process of partisan dealignment has not yet come to an end – there are no signs of a realignment. As a result, electoral participation and voting behaviour are less predictable. This provides parties



with strong incentives for intense campaigns, and has led to considerable shifts in the party system. The first shifts took place between the traditional parties represented in the Bundestag; more recently, new political entrepreneurs such as the founders of the AfD appear to be attracting votes from dissatisfied citizens. The decreasing predictability and the increasing fluidity of voting behaviour are thus likely to have repercussions for the party system. In the end, these developments may change the rules of the game for political parties and the interplay of parties and voters in Germany.

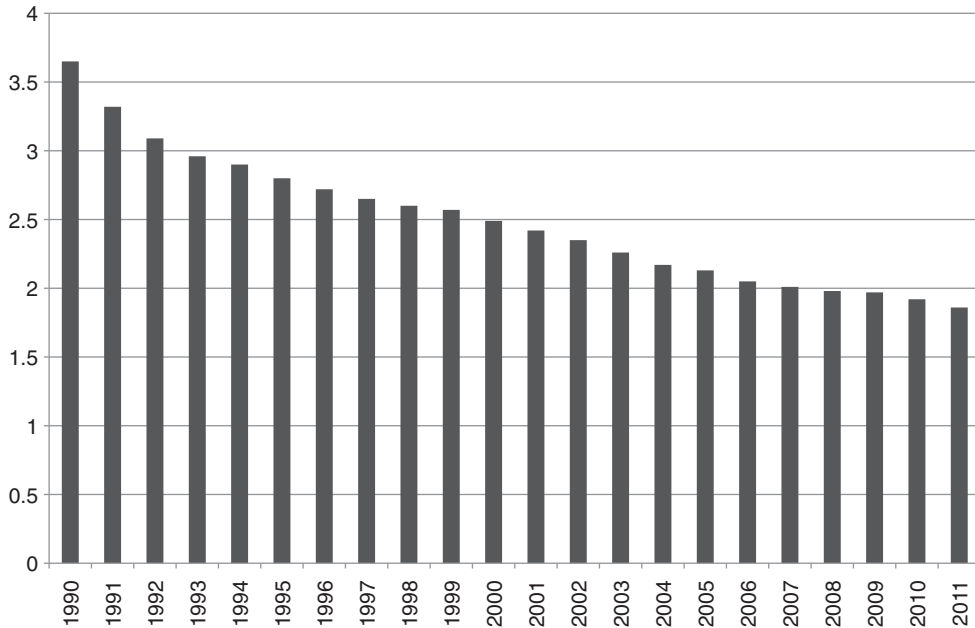
### Shrinking membership organisations

The Social and the Christian Democrats have traditionally relied on large membership organisations for the recruitment and training of their leadership personnel, including their candidates for electoral contests (Klein *et al.* 2011). This continued to be the case after 1990. And although political parties have increasingly made use of professional agencies in their electoral campaigns (Katz and Mair 2002), their members on the ground are still considered to be a crucial resource in fighting campaigns, both in terms of manpower and to maintain a credible presence across the country. Nevertheless, studies of party membership decline since 1990 observe the growing fluidity and unpredictability of voting behaviour since 1990.

In the mid-1970s, all three major German parties – the Christian Democratic parties (CDU and CSU) as well as the Social Democrats (SPD) – maintained extensive membership organisations. In 1976 and 1977 the SPD had over a million members on the territory of the ‘old’ Federal Republic. Its membership has steadily declined since, a decline that has accelerated since the late 1990s. By the end of 2012, the SPD’s membership had halved to approximately 477,000. The Christian Democrats’ membership continued to grow between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s, but then also began to decline. Unlike the SPD, the CDU’s membership benefited from German unification. The party had had a ‘sister’ organisation in the German Democratic Republic, and the Christian Democrats’ membership therefore received a certain boost following unification; but it, too, has declined since. At the end of 2012, the CDU had approximately 476,000 members, with almost 148,000 in the CSU. Nevertheless, the rate of decline experienced by the Christian Democrats has been lower than for the SPD.

Figure 7.1 expresses the Bundestag parties’ aggregate membership as a percentage of the population eligible to join a party (all residents, irrespective of citizenship, of 16 years of age or older). The bars in the diagram illustrate that aggregate party membership has nearly halved between 1990 and the end of 2011: in 1990 approximately 3.65 per cent of all German residents were members of a mainstream party (CDU, SPD, CSU, FDP, Greens, or PDS). By the end of 2011, this percentage had dropped to 1.86 (with The Left replacing the PDS).

This decline has had important practical consequences. The smaller parties have never been able to rely on their activists as strongly as the larger parties when it comes to fighting countrywide electoral campaigns. Their presence on the ground has always been relatively weak, especially in the larger, less densely populated area of the northeast such as the rural parts of Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg–West Pomerania, and Brandenburg. Although the SPD and CDU/CSU are still able to draw on a relatively dense network of activists in the larger western German states (especially Baden–Württemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, and North Rhine–Westphalia) and the city states of Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen (Niedermayer 2012), their presence in other areas, especially in eastern Germany, has become less extensive. In such regions, even the larger parties cannot rely on their local associations to run campaigns and show a credible presence. In these areas, in particular, the parties have moved more closely towards the ideal-typical model of so-called ‘electoral-professional’ parties (Panebianco 1988), a type of organisation that tends



*Figure 7.1* Membership of the German mainstream parties as percentage of eligible persons over the age of 16, 1990–2011

Source: authors' own analysis. Data extracted from Niedermayer (2013: 3).

Note: Parties included are: CDU, SPD, CSU, FDP, Greens, PDS/Left Party/The Left

to rely less on its membership organisation on the ground than on professional agencies outside the party for campaigning purposes. In particular, the electoral-professional party depends heavily on the public trust enjoyed by party leaders and the funds and expertise that can be accessed by their representatives in the national or regional parliaments (Grabow 2000).

A number of parties have sought to respond to the loss of membership on the ground by modernising their organisations. In the main, these reforms have been intended to increase the attractiveness of party membership by strengthening the powers of grassroots members within the parties. In some cases, parties have sought to enhance their attractiveness by opening up policy debates to non-members, or encouraging looser forms of association below the level of formal membership. Such reforms have taken place in all parties, albeit to varying degrees. In the CDU, organisational changes in the early 2000s led to an increasing involvement of party members in candidate selection, and to a lesser extent in leadership selection. The CDU's grassroots members, however, still have relatively little say in policy decisions, which remain the prerogative of formal party associations and representative party organs (Turner 2013: 127). Other parties have gone further. Three examples of manifesto formation prior to the election of 2013 illustrate these developments.

The FDP has used web-based platforms for programme discussion since 2002. For its 2013 manifesto, the party introduced an internet-based tool to make its draft manifesto available for public discussion. Registered users (members and non-members alike) were invited to suggest amendments, and the move had considerable public resonance. Also, intra-party groups within the FDP have become more likely to force membership ballots on substantive policy issues on to the agenda. The FDP's 2011 membership ballot on a proposal rejecting the European

stability mechanism (ESM) ended with a narrow victory for the party leadership, which opposed the proposal, but is an example of growing membership involvement (Hornsteiner and Saalfeld 2014).

The SPD, too, has strengthened the voice of non-members as well as members in its procedures. In its organisational reform of 2011, the party lowered the threshold for groups seeking ballots of the entire membership for leadership elections and important policy decisions. In the run-up to the 2013 election, the SPD launched a ‘citizens’ dialogue’ (*Bürgerdialog*), in which the party called on the public to propose policy reforms. Although the manifesto was ultimately adopted by a conference of party delegates in April 2013, the strategy of increasing participation was designed to reach out beyond traditional party members. A further example of the increased emphasis on meaningful membership participation is the SPD’s membership ballot on the coalition agreement negotiated with the Christian Democrats in 2013 (Hornsteiner and Saalfeld 2014).

For the Green Party, direct grassroots participation and a high level of leadership accountability have traditionally been characteristic organisational features. In the run-up to the 2013 election, the party held a membership ballot on the choice of national lead candidates (one female, one male) for the election. In a highly competitive election, party members chose two candidates from a pool of 15 contenders. In the same election, the party’s leadership involved grassroots members closely in the process of manifesto writing. The members’ votes led to unexpected results both in manifesto formulation and the leadership elections (Hornsteiner and Saalfeld 2014).

The extent and intensity of intra-party debates over candidates and policy demonstrated a ‘thirst’ for meaningful participation at the parties’ grassroots and suggests that the parties’ reforms have been at least partially successful in tackling the trend towards membership apathy.

### Stable parties in elected office

Despite considerable changes in the electoral environment and memberships of political parties, the ‘party in government’ at the parliamentary level has remained surprisingly unaffected: despite a complex political space, with many risks for coalition formation, cabinet stability has remained remarkably high since the early 1970s. The refragmentation of the party system in the country and in parliament has not jeopardised stability. Despite considerable economic shocks (such as the banking crisis of 2008–09 and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone) and growing electoral volatility, governments have remained stable, not least due to the stability of the parties in public office: in the Bundestag, parties have shown a high degree of unity, with no significant splits or breakaways at the parliamentary level. All cabinets since 1983 save one (the second Schröder cabinet in 2002–05) have served out their full four-year terms in government. This is in stark contrast to the simultaneous experience of considerable cabinet instability in other European multiparty systems (Saalfeld 2013: 65).

How can we explain this discrepancy between growing fluidity at the electoral and membership level, on the one hand, and continuing stability at the parliamentary and governmental level, on the other? Katz and Mair (1995) offer an influential explanation, arguing that many European parties have compensated for their weakening ties with voters and civil society by partially suspending competition and by jointly appropriating more and more state funds such as public subsidies in a ‘cartel’ of established parties. Despite some differences in emphasis, this answer is partly compatible with Panebianco’s (1988) claim that we have witnessed a rise of the ‘electoral-professional party’ as a model of party organisation, whereby political life within the party is strongly dominated by a professional leadership in the governmental sphere, supported by professional agencies rather than rank-and-file members.

There is some support for Katz's and Mair's argument if we consider the public funding parliamentary parties receive in Germany. In January 2010, for example, the five parliamentary parties in the Bundestag were able to employ a total of 870 staff from public funds, 397 of whom occupied university degree-level positions. The total amount of funding available to the legislative parties in that year was over €78.7 million. This was in addition to the 4,209 publicly funded staff members employed by members individually, and has allowed the parliamentary leadership and the 'party in public office' to maintain a certain degree of autonomy from the more volatile voters, the (declining number of) extra-parliamentary activists, and collateral interest groups such as trades unions or church-based organisations (Hassel and Trampusch 2006).

In addition to organisational and institutional arguments, the so-called 'median-voter theorem' points to a further, strategic reason for the continued strength of the major parties. This theorem cannot be explained fully in this chapter (for a brief non-technical explanation see Hornsteiner and Saalfeld 2014; for a fuller treatment with regard to coalition governments see Laver and Shepsle 1996). Nevertheless, the key idea is intuitively plausible: large and cohesive political parties occupying the centre ground of the political spectrum across the main dimensions of policy conflict are in a particularly influential position when it comes to coalition formation. Because of their political centrality, they are more likely than extreme parties to be included in government coalitions. Most important, they are in a strong bargaining position, because they tend to be able to choose between competing coalition partners to their left and to their right. Since all new contenders in the Bundestag have appeared on the ideological extremes (the Greens in 1983, the PDS in 1990, and The Left in 2009), one of the established centrist parties has always remained in this strong bargaining position. Despite the changes in the party system and growing fluidity at the electoral level, therefore, one of the established parties has thus far always controlled the parliamentary median. Hence, although electoral support for the main parties has eroded, and although voters have become more volatile, the main parties have retained as much power over policy as in times when they had in excess of 45 per cent of the vote (Lees 2013; Hornsteiner and Saalfeld 2014).

## Conclusions

The German party system has experienced considerable change since the 1990s. Voters have become more critical and volatile. As a result, the party system has become more fragmented and fluid. Not only has the parties' electoral base eroded, but so has their membership. These developments in the 'party-in-the-electorate' and the 'party on the ground' have resulted largely from economic and social changes in the environment of political parties (see Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Inglehart (1997) and others have demonstrated that this is not a German peculiarity. Crucially for this chapter, political parties have responded to these trends in at least four ways. First, they have compensated for their more uncertain electoral and organisational environment by accessing state funds in line with the cartel-party thesis advanced by Katz and Mair (1995). This has effectively strengthened the party in public office at the expense of the party as organisation. Second, they have built up more professional campaign organisations, as electoral campaigns have become more decisive for electoral outcomes. Third, they have become more sophisticated strategic players in the policy space that constitutes the battleground for party competition in German politics. Finally, some parties have opened up their organisations to non-members and have enhanced opportunities for membership participation within their organisations.

While greater volatility, in particular, has increased the political uncertainty for Germany's party leaders, this may be an attractive development from a normative perspective: more than

in the past, voters are actually choosing, and calling government parties to account for their performance. The 1998 election was the first postwar election where the voters' choices led to a complete change of government parties (rather than a change in government through changing post-electoral choices of coalition arrangements by party leaders). The electoral losses suffered by the SPD in 2005 and 2009 were in direct response to the party's involvement in unpopular welfare reforms during the preceding parliaments. The FDP's ejection from the Bundestag in 2013 also demonstrates this increased level of electoral accountability for (perceived or real) poor performance in government. As a result, very long episodes of stable government by the same parties (such as Adenauer's various coalitions dominated by the CDU/CSU between 1949 and 1963, or Kohl's reign at the helm of a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition in 1982–98) are less likely to occur. With the exception of the 1990, 1994, and 2002 elections, the party composition of the German government has changed after each of the seven general elections since unification. In short, alternation in government has increased.

However, this new fluidity does not come without electoral and organisational risks to the parties. In particular, coalition formation between the parties has become more difficult. It is likely that the national parties will follow patterns explored at the regional and local levels, where coalitions across the traditional divide between centre-right and centre-left have become more common in recent years. These may include coalitions between the SPD and The Left at the national level, an option ruled out by the Social Democrats between 1990 and 2013. They may also include coalitions between the Christian Democrats and the Greens. A CDU–Green coalition failed in the state of Hamburg in 2010 but was formed again in Hesse in 2013, in an event widely perceived as a test case for a future national coalition. Such new coalitions will not be without costs, however: they may lead to more controversies within the parties, and they may contribute to severe electoral penalties in situations where parties lose credibility due to costly coalition agreements.

## Note

- 1 In the transitional period of 1989–90 the party was known as SED-PDS. In 1990 the SED-PDS experienced an almost complete change of leadership and was renamed PDS. The PDS, in turn, was renamed Linkspartei.PDS in 2005.

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