

Assessing the 2009 German Federal Election: How the SPD's Failure to Coordinate the Left Put the Right in Power

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The recent 2009 German Federal Elections provided a decisive electoral victory for the Christian Democrats, who returned to power without the Social Democrats for the first time in more than a decade. But this shift from grand coalition to center-right cabinet is not the only change in the German electoral landscape—in retrospect, the 2009 election may prove to be a historic turning point in the German party system. The election marked the low water marks in the percentage of list votes won by the CDU and the CSU since the founding democratic election of 1949, when the German party system was in its infancy and party attachments not yet mature. The 2009 election also saw the worst performance in terms of list votes for the SPD since the close of WWII, and the highest percentage of list votes registered by the FDP, the Greens, and die Linke (the former Communists) in German history. In this paper I examine district level returns for clues of how the left is fracturing and what a divided left may mean for the future of German electoral politics. I argue this election may in fact signal a significant and perhaps imminent turning point in partisan attachment on the left that will have wide-ranging implications for the SPD's electoral and coalition building strategies in the future.

Introduction

The 2009 general election campaign in Germany was by many accounts a timid affair—some even suggested it was “boring” (Cohen, 2009)² The Christian Democrats (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/CDU)—along with their perennial Bavarian partners³, the Christian Socialists (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern / CSU)—had been locked in a grand coalition with the Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands/SPD) since 2005, and there were

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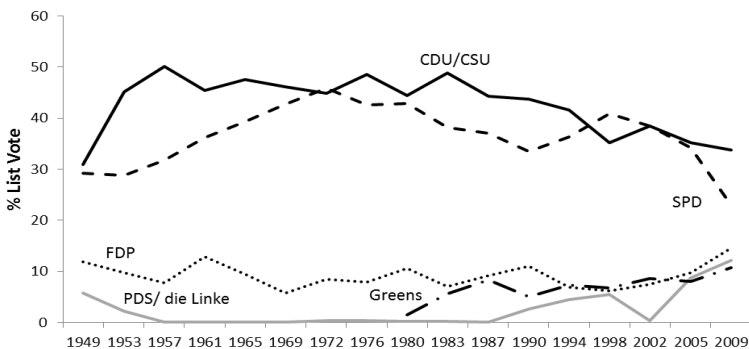
² Joschka Fischer, former Foreign Minister and Green called it “the most boring German election ever” (Cohen, 2009).

³ The CSU only competes in districts inside of Bavaria and the CDU only competes in districts outside of Bavaria. The two parties work together in the Bundestag. In the remainder of this piece, the CDU/CSU will be referred to in unison because of this agreement.

questions as to whether either side would be able to break out of the forced partnership this time around. Both parties had few accomplishments that were impressive or inspiring enough to point voters to, and neither side was interested in addressing one of the more pressing decisions that awaited the new government – would Germany remain committed to the Afghanistan conflict (Mattox, 2009)? All the while, in the midst of one of the worst economic climates in modern European history, Germany languished with ennui and antipathy toward their expected role in averting what many warned was an imminent economic collapse to both their east and west. And so the election came and went, with little public fanfare. Turnout, as expected, was abysmal by German standards, down almost 7 percent from an already anemic showing in 2005 of about 77 percent of registered voters.

While the campaigns might have been dull, the election results were anything but. In fact, the 2009 federal elections were truly historic on several accounts. First, the CDU/CSU and the SPD had their worst electoral showings since World War II. Combined, they only managed to pull in 57 percent of the list vote, a low water mark for the top competitors of the left and right in German democratic history. Second, it was also an historic election for frequent junior coalition partner, the Free Democrats (*Freie Demokratische Partei Deutschlands / FDP*), who, upon their best electoral showing ever, now find themselves in a government coalition with the CDU/CSU for the tenth time since WWII. On the left side of the aisle, the Greens (*Bündnis 90/ die Grünen*), who helped solidify coalition governments with the SPD in 1998 and 2002, and the Left (*die Linke*), (who have never been in government), also won their largest vote shares *ever* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. German Party System (1949-2009)



Source: 1. Mackie, Thomas, and Richard Rose.,1991. *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press. 2. *Psephos Adam Carr's Election Archive*

The 2009 federal election may have also signaled a significant and perhaps imminent turning point in partisan attachments on the left. To make this case, I examine district level electoral returns for clues of how the left side of the German

party system is fracturing, how the split forming on the left probably cost the SPD the 2009 election, and how if left unaddressed, these fissures will deeply hamper the SPD's prospects for returning to government in the near term. But there is hope for the SPD. After briefly recapping the election results, I present three scenarios of varying likelihood that could help them find their electoral feet again.

The 2009 German Federal Election

While the left side of the party system was fragmenting, the right managed to coordinate a winning strategy in 2009. Despite the CDU/CSU's poor performance on the list vote, they still managed to win enough seats to break free from the grand coalition formed with the SPD in 2005, and cobble together a majority government coalition by virtually running the table in the single seat districts.⁴ All told, the CDU/CSU combined to win about three quarters of these seats—many of which the SPD won in 2005—in what can be fairly described as the single greatest collapse in the Social Democratic Party's recent history. In total, the SPD would see more than 64 seats they held after 2005 eventually flip into the CDU/CSU column, which in terms of governing, meant a net swing of at least 128 seats in the Bundestag. Die Linke only rubbed salt in the SPD's wounds, taking 13 additional seats from them in the east, and cutting even deeper into the SPD's list seat margin by improving their list vote substantially in the region. Down almost 80 seats from their previous *Bundestagsfraktion* (parliamentary group), the SPD was challenged from all sides in 2009. Table 1 reports the national level election results.

While the policies that stand to come out of the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition could remain fairly consistent with the previous government's—for example, there should be no real shift on a continued German presence in Afghanistan for the time being (Mattox, 2009), or in Germany's central role as engine and conscience of the EU and its attitude toward Turkey's "special status" in EU ascension talks—there is ample reason to hit the electoral 'panic button' at Social Democratic headquarters. The left is fractured deeply, perhaps irretrievably. Never before has the share of seats and votes on the left been so splintered, and, more importantly, into such large pieces. Die Linke and the Greens now each account for a quarter of the list vote going to the left, with the SPD comprising the remaining half. With vote shares that large, neither competitor is likely to go away anytime soon, and yet, a coalition between all three parties—a necessity at this point if the left side of the German party system is to govern alone—would be very tricky to pull off for a number of reasons. First, Die

⁴ Germany employs a mixed electoral system where candidates compete in single seat electoral districts throughout the whole country (much like the United States or the United Kingdom), while simultaneously appearing on regional party lists. German voters are allowed two votes; one for a candidate of their choice in their district, and a second for a party list. Half of the seats in the Bundestag are filled through direct district level elections, and half through the party lists, so candidates who lose their own districts may still be seated through the party list. A more complete discussion of the German electoral system appears later in this piece, and addresses the differing electoral strategies that result from this complex system.

Linke is ascendant, and as we will see later, they are firmly entrenched as the largest party in many eastern German districts where the SPD used to regularly outpoll the CDU. The rise of die Linke is therefore undermining the SPD's ability to fend

TABLE 1. 2009 (2005 +/-) German Federal Election Results

	First Vote %	Con- stituency Seats	Second Vote %	List Seats	Total Seats
CDU/CSU	39.4 (-1.5)	218 (+68)	33.8 (-1.4)	21 (-55)	239 (+13)
SPD	27.9 (-10.5)	64 (-81)	23.0 (-11.2)	82 (+5)	146 (-76)
FDP	9.4 (+4.7)	0 (0)	14.6 (+4.7)	93 (+32)	93 (+32)
die Linke	11.1 (+3.1)	16 (+13)	11.9 (+3.2)	60 (+9)	76 (+22)
Greens	9.2 (+4.8)	1 (+1)	10.7 (+2.6)	67 (+17)	68 (+17)

Source: 1. *Psephos Adam Carr's Election Archive* available at <http://psephos.adam.carr.net/countries/g/germany/2009/germany20091.txt>, and 2. *The Federal Returning Officer* available at http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_09/ergebnisse/wahlkreisergebnisse/index.html

off the right regionally and nationally. Given die Linke's lineage as a successor to the former Socialist Unity (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands / SED*), itself the former communist party of the east, there is little reason to believe that the SPD would be able to forge a mutually beneficial pact with this rising star on the left without placing its reputation, and SPD votes in the west, in harm's way.

Second, the persistence of the Green vote has made such a reconciliation between the SPD and die Linke virtually moot, as any left governing coalition would realistically require all three parties and the Greens have been even less sanguine in the past about joining forces with die Linke than have the SPD. In fact, in Saarland the hopes on the left for a red-red-green coalition at the state level were only months ago smashed by the Greens, who, in an effort to send a message to Oskar Lofontaine and die Linke, entered into a never before seen coalition with the CDU and the FDP. The main reason for the defection according to the Saarland Greens was just one word—"trust" (Kirchfeld, 2009).

And while red/red coalitions between the SPD and die Linke do actually exist at the *Land* level in parts of the east, they are tenuous affairs at best. In its most recent incarnation, in Brandenburg, for example, the new partnership between the SPD and die Linke is already on the rocks over allegations that three cabinet members from

die Linke are actually former *Stasi* operatives (Penfold, 2009). As entrenched as die Linke is in the east, so too is the SPD in the west, where it sits – even in one of its darkest electoral hours—as the largest party of the left in every district. Its strength is virtually insurmountable in the west by die Linke, or (with the exception of perhaps a handful of northern German districts) by the Greens. It is because of the SPD’s entrenched position in the west that any future scenario for governing coalitions involving the left must first consider how they can return to form.

In some ways, the German party system finds itself today in a similar position to many of its European neighbors, where broad cultural shifts (Inglehart, 1997) and declining partisan attachments (see Dalton and Wattenberg, 2001), are resulting in increased electoral volatility (Drummond, 2006) and challenges to the electoral cleavages that ‘froze’ a century ago (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). What is perhaps unique about the German situation, however, are the many opportunities for electoral coordination which are largely absent in the strictly proportional or majoritarian systems that otherwise dominate the electoral landscape of Western Europe. The mixed system in Germany combines aspects of both of these archetypal electoral arrangements, producing advantages that will accrue to those electoral blocs who can coordinate prior to elections, and not just after the fact in the coalition formation process. Thus, while the electoral fortunes of the SPD seem particularly bleak at the moment, there is hope yet that they may be able to return to government in the near future.

Specifically, their fortunes likely rest on three general scenarios: 1) a collapse of the CDU similar to what the SPD experienced in the 2009 federal election, which could result in the only viable future coalition being a return to the grand coalition of 2005; 2) the ability to forge a ‘stoplight’ coalition at a future date between the SPD (red), the FDP (yellow), and the Greens, forgoing the need to broker a complicated and politically difficult deal with die Linke; and 3) a collapse of support for *die Linke*, especially in the east, where the party won 13 former SPD seats and indirectly contributed to dozens more that the SPD would eventually lose to the CDU. As I will argue later, these three scenarios need not be mutually exclusive, and in fact, it may well take all three to actually return the SPD to government outside of a grand coalition. Unfortunately for the SPD, each scenario has its complications, and none lies completely within their own control.

Scenario 1: The Collapse of the CDU

The CDU already collapsed back in 1998, and it could collapse again. Toward the end of the Kohl government, the CDU faced a true crisis of legitimacy. Voters had become fed up with the mounting economic toll the country was taking following the reunification effort spearheaded by Helmut Kohl and the CDU. Unemployment had reached a post WWII high and had nearly doubled since the fall

of the Berlin Wall (EIRO). In the east, the unemployment rate was even higher (Weber 2000), and by election day, Kohl and the CDU were all but finished.

The CDU/CSU had been in power with Kohl the chancellor for 16 years, a veritable eternity given the political changes that occurred during his tenure. At its apex during the Kohl chancellorship—the 1983 election—the CDU/CSU accounted for more than 48 percent of the list vote in Germany. By 1998, however, these two partners only managed 35 percent of the vote. In terms of seats, the CDU/CSU had their high water mark in 1990 with 319 seats, but that total eroded substantially just 8 years later when they garnered only 245, a loss of 74 seats.

As strong as this reversal was, it pales in comparison to the collapse of the Social Democrats, who, over an 11 year period, managed to lose twice as many seats. In 1998, the SPD under Gerhard Schröder cruised to win a total of 298 seats. By 2009, however, the SPD *Bundestagsfraktion* had withered to half that size, with just 146 MPs. While some of the losses visited upon both parties were the result of a downsized Bundestag in 2002 (from 656 seats to the current 598), at least 81 SPD seats were lost in the 2009 election alone. Of these lost seats, 13 came in districts to a nationally weaker, but regionally (in the east) extremely formidable die Linke. Figure 2 demonstrates the size of the SPD's retreat from 2005 numbers across the 299 single constituency seats in the Bundestag. A mere shadow of their former selves, one wonders whether the SPD has been dealt a crippling blow to their future governing prospects this time around.

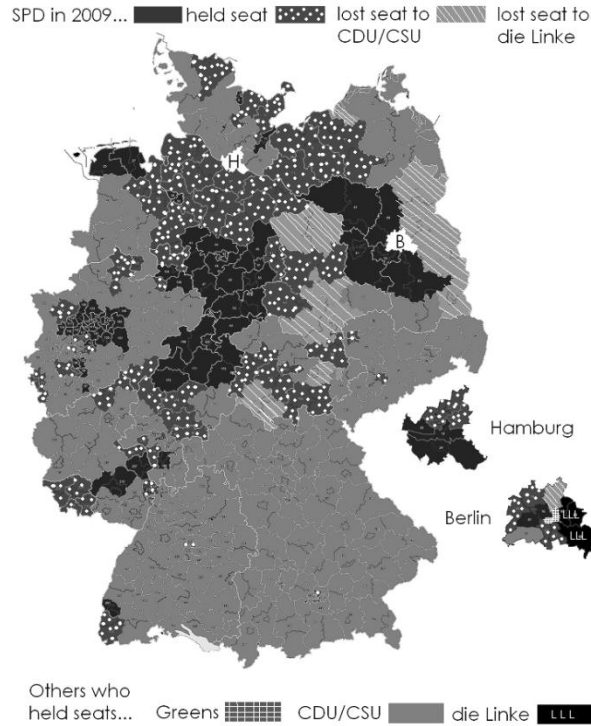
Ebb and flow in national elections is normal, and to be sure, list votes do not tell a complete story. For instance, the CDU's losses continued in 2009, so this is not a simple story of vote transfer from one national party to another. Rather, this is a cautionary tale of how within-bloc volatility (see Bartolini and Mair, 1990) can be disastrous when the parties in these blocs do not, or cannot, coordinate. In such cases, a transfer of votes within-bloc from one party to another (or group of others) can, in fact, diminish the chances that *any* party in the bloc will be able to govern by fracturing the bloc into roughly equivalent pieces.⁵ Examining the vote in terms of left and right bloc votes in 2009, we see this problem arise specifically for the left, while the right bloc's governing potential remains relatively intact.

In 2009, The FDP solidified its ranking as third largest party, but die Linke and the Greens also increased their own shares of the electoral pie. While there was

⁵ For example, the rise of fringe parties on the right in Austria and the Netherlands is making governing from the right very difficult in these countries. The 2010 Dutch election in particular might well illustrate how differentiation within a bloc can undermine government formation. Geert Wilder's Dutch Freedom Party increased its vote from 6 percent in 2006 to 16 percent this time around, as the Christian Democratic Appeal, a center-right party dropped from 27 percent to 14 percent. The VVD's increase in votes and seats has hampered the right, as the party has repeatedly walked out on coalition talks with both the CDA and the Liberals.

likely little net shift in votes between right and left, within these blocs, the larger parties have been losing ground (see Table 1). Increased differentiation on the

Figure 2. Constituency Seats Won and Lost by the SPD in 2009



Source: *The Federal Returning Officer* available at http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_09/ergebnisse/wahlkreisergebnisse/index.html

Map created using wikimedia commons images in the public domain

margins of Western party systems due to the rise of New Politics (Inglehart, 1997) has also resulted in heightened electoral volatility in many advanced democracies (Drummond, 2006). While only the Greens could be accurately described as a New Politics party in Germany—for example, the FDP has been a staple of German governments for decades and die Linke can trace its roots back to the former communists—this differentiation and the volatility it brings is nevertheless a real and present concern for both the CDU/CSU and the SPD. The ability to govern outside of a grand coalition, thus, depends on the ability to re-gather the within-bloc votes each party is losing to these smaller competitors. Thanks to some very shrewd coordination between the FDP and the CDU/CSU, the right side is the only side of the German party system that remains relatively intact despite this growing fragmentation.

An increasingly important part of the right's ability to coordinate has to do with the peculiar institution of *Überhangsmandate* (overhang seats). These extra seats have been equated in the German media to electoral college votes in the sense that they can help manufacture or bolster a majority in the Bundestag, but the similarities really end there. In presidential elections in the United States, states receive electoral votes equal to their congressional delegations, and these votes can be cast usually all at once for the candidate who wins the popular vote in the state. Given that Senate seats in the US are awarded equally between small and large population states, there is some disproportionality built into electoral votes, as smaller states can cast a disproportionately high number of electoral votes for a popular vote winner whose vote total in that particularly small state—say Wyoming or Montana or Alaska—represents a proportionately small part of the national popular vote in total. In some instances, as in the 2000 election, this can lead to reversals of the national popular vote, handing a win to a less popular candidate. Usually, however, this institution means little more than a larger win for the eventual president than he or she might have expected from the national popular vote alone.

In Germany, Bundestag seats are awarded either to winners of single seats constituencies, of which there are 299, or to members of party lists who did not win their constituencies and are instead headed to parliament on the strength of their party's showing in the list round of the vote. In Germany's mixed proportional system, the list totals are actually used to determine how many total seats should be awarded to each party, and then how those seats are to be distributed among the party lists across the 16 Länder. Overhang seats occur when a party is entitled to fewer seats in a Land than they already won in the constituency elections. For example, let us say the CDU would be entitled to 33 seats in a particular Land when looking at their list vote, but the party actually managed to win 34 seats in that Land's constituency elections already. In this instance, the 34th winner gets to keep her seat, and no additional party members on the list would receive a seat in the Bundestag.

The method of checking the first round against the second is what keeps elections fairly proportional in Germany. Not checking them—as Ukraine's (prior to 2006) or Russia's mixed parallel system prescribes—normally leads to greater disproportionality and ultimately fewer parties in parliament (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). But while the results ultimately are meant to be more fair under mixed proportional systems, overhang seats are one of the occasional irritants to perfect proportionality. In Germany's case, rather than bumping the extra MP out, or subtracting the extra seat(s) from the party's other Land lists (or even worse, other parties' seat totals), the Bundestag simply adds the additional seat to the total number of seats in parliament. In the end, analysts, citizens, and politicians alike must wait until after the election to know exactly how many seats will be in the new

Bundestag, however, careful strategists can seek to exploit these rules and maximize their bounty.

So while the electoral college is zero-sum, and each additional vote for one candidate is a lost vote for another, overhang seats in the Bundestag are instead positive sum, and if parties can cooperate, they can exploit this oddity. With eroding support for the main two parties and increasing parliamentary fragmentation clearly evident in 2009, cooperation on the right or the left will become increasingly critical to escaping grand coalitions. This has led to a strategy on the part of the CDU/CSU to focus their efforts in winning most of their seats in the single constituency seat round and then cueing their voters to consider supporting the FDP in the list portion of the vote, where the FDP can be successful in their own right.

This coordination appears to be symbiotic if the two would-be partners can signal early that a coalition is in the offing. Thomas Gschwend (2000) has been able to show that some FDP voters act strategically in general elections by casting their personal vote in the single district round for the CDU/CSU candidate and then later casting their list vote for the FDP. This strategy boosts the likelihood that the CDU/CSU candidates win some of the closest single seat constituencies over the SPD, while the FDP still receives maximum support for the list vote round. The strategy ends up contributing more to the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition in terms of seats than what otherwise might have resulted from voters simply casting their votes for their most preferred party. Just how much the two parties benefit is unclear. Herrmann and Pappi (2008) have found similar evidence to Gschwend, although their results suggest that the rate of strategic voting may be as low as 1 to 3 percent. Such institutional benefits of coordination, however, are hardly limited to Germany and may be present to varying degree in a variety of mixed systems (Ferrara and Herron, 2005).

In the 2009 election, the CDU/CSU managed to manufacture 24 overhang seats—a 4 percent bonus to the size of the Bundestag and a serious addition to their ruling coalition. This coordination is not coincidental. The instructions are often reinforced from the top of the parties, although it may be in practice quite diffuse across the 16 Länder. Angela Merkel was quoted prior to the election saying that "a surplus mandate is no second class mandate", and that she would be happy to form a coalition with the FDP even if it were ultimately a manufactured majority using overhang mandates (Dunham, 2009). The FDP, in turn, seems to have formally responded by cueing their voters to cast their second vote for the party, while reminding others with campaign placards that "Zweitstimme ist Gold"—"second vote (List vote) is gold", a double entendre of sorts which builds on the party's campaign color of yellow.

The 24 additional overhang seats in this election—the most ever in a German election with all going to the CDU/CSU—swelled the Bundestag to 622 members

from 598. And although Chancellor Merkel was not afraid to voice her willingness to ‘govern by technicality’, it turns out she did not actually need the seats in the end. The CDU/CSU-FDP coalition would have been mathematically possible even without the overhang seats. The right, is thus, coalescing and coordinating, while the left is splintering.

The Greens and die Linke now together comprise a vote share equal to the SPD, and efforts to coordinate strategically as the FDP and the CDU have in the past have gained little traction. The Greens would be the more willing participant in this regard since they are a former coalition partner from 1998 and 2002, and have only been able to win a single constituency seat (in Berlin) so far. As such, they have little to lose in most constituencies and much to gain in the form of list seats. The bigger problem, it appears, is the regional dominance of die Linke in the east, where the SPD is now running in (sometimes distant) third place. After the 2009 election, Die Linke is now in a better position than ever before, and with its 13 additional district wins over the SPD, it will not be striking any bargains to abandon constituency votes in the near future. Such a move would mean giving up a substantial number of tangible constituency seats, to say nothing at all of the ideological problems this kind of compact would likely create for supporters of both the SPD and die Linke. The SPD in 2009 found itself fighting for its electoral life on two ideological fronts, against efforts to privatize and cut taxes on the right, and against hard line workers’ rights and the unpopular decision to send troops to Afghanistan from the left. One wonders whether it will be able to find a winning strategy going forward that does not fundamentally alter the nature the German party system.

Although we cannot know if the CDU will suffer a collapse similar to the SPD’s in 2009, we do know that tactically it has a strong advantage to mitigate seat loss already. In fact, the percentage of votes going to the CDU/CSU in 2009 were the lowest since World War II, and yet it managed to gain enough seats to break free of the grand coalition. This is proof enough that the right in Germany has found an ingenious way to insulate itself from protracted negative shifts in electoral volatility. Of course, things could change – Germany’s (and Europe’s for that matter) economic woes are substantial, and governing during such times is often a thankless task. Add to this an unpopular conflict in Afghanistan that now only the CDU/CSU must answer to, and it would not be far-fetched to imagine the SPD as somewhat fortunate to be out of power at the moment. That said, as I have discussed so far, the problems the SPD faces are not just popular, but also structural. A greater and more commensurate structural threat on the right, similar to that which the SPD faces on the left, would entail the emergence of a far-right and populist party like the National Democrats (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* / NDP) or *die Republikaner* as a meaningful list party. Such an emergence could send the FDP and their more moderate social policies fleeing back to the left for future coalition prospects. This is the second scenario.

Scenario 2: The Stoplight Coalition

The so-called *Ampelkoalition* or “stoplight coalition” is a potential partnership between the SPD (red), the FDP (yellow) and the Greens. There has never been a Bundestag coalition between these three partners before, although there have been occasional stoplight coalitions at the Land level, specifically in the 1990s in Brandenburg and Bremen. Ideologically, it would mean a governing coalition that brought together the far left, the center left, and the economically and classically liberal right. Just how broad a coalition are we speaking about? According to data from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*, German respondents tend to place the Greens and the SPD fairly close together between 2.5 and 3.5 on the 0-10 left-right continuum, and the FDP between 5.5. Of course, these are historical placements by respondents, and they probably only partially capture where the parties stood in the lead up to the 2009 election. For the sake of comparison, die Linke often falls at about “1.5” on the 11 point scale.

Ideology is an important factor in coalition formation. Where coalitions are necessary to govern, the style of campaigning tends to focus on party platforms and clearly stated policy objectives. Ideology not only plays a strong role in the campaigns, it is often all voters have to go on when casting their votes, and parties seek to define themselves clearly (Granberg and Holmberg 1988). These systems usually also have large district proportional representation where voters cast ballots for party lists, rather than individual candidates, and so party discipline is often the norm as individual political careers rise and fall with the electoral fortunes of parties, and not on the popularity of individual campaigns. Ideological signals become more prevalent and more important in such systems, forming the prime indicator of potential governing coalitions well before the election results are ever known (Stevenson and Vonnahme 2009).

This is a far cry from the candidate-centered politics inspired by single seat district systems, where the incentive to cultivate personal reputations is higher (Carey and Shugart 1995), and where tracking parties in ideological space can be quite tricky due to greater ideological bias (Drummond, forthcoming). Thus, looking at the three parties ideologically, for voters at least, a stoplight coalition might not seem out of the question. Their platforms and ideological positions are well-known, and Germans likely could create a narrative about what such a coalition would mean in terms of governance. But the German mixed electoral system has aspects that incentivize both candidate reputations and party ideology, and so when we think about potential coalitions, platforms are not the only things that matter—elites matter too.

The SPD and the Greens have shared government in the recent past, and throughout the 1970s the FDP was in coalition with the SPD on four occasions, without their usual partner, the CDU/CSU. In terms of key policy proposals, the

Greens and the FDP share a commitment to peace building, and so there is room to forge a friendship on this policy. Guido Westerwelle, the new foreign minister in the CDU/CSU-FDP government, and *Spitzenkandidat* (leader) of the FDP, in fact made his first official foreign policy announcement about a removal of all US nuclear warheads from Germany (Phalnikar, 2009). While this was seen as little more than red meat for the German public—there are probably only a couple dozen US warheads left in Germany anyway – it was nevertheless consonant with the Green’s desire to forge a complete disarmament of nuclear weaponry (inside Germany and out).

But the number one position of the ultimately laissez-faire FDP in the 2009 elections was tax cuts and simplifying the German tax system, something which they vocally made a condition for accepting a position in a coalition with the CDU/CSU. These are difficult ambitions to square with an SPD whose prime stance on the electoral platform was a commitment to the social welfare state. Mr. Westerwelle probably said it best when asked about a stoplight coalition, responding that the SPD are “used up, splintered and not fit for governing” (DDP/the Local, 2009). And so the reality appears to be that prospects for a stoplight coalition in the future are quite dim. Even worse, and indicative of just how dire is the position of the SPD, such a coalition would not have even represented a majority of seats this time around. An SPD-FDP-Greens coalition would have netted only 307 in 2009, enough for a majority in a Bundestag that is meant to seat 598, but still 5 seats short of the governing threshold in the oversized 622 seat assembly which saw 24 overhang seats roll toward the CDU/CSU.

Where the stoplight coalition gains some credence is when imagining the emergence of a far right party like the NDP. Were the NDP able to clear the 5 percent hurdle and win seats in the Bundestag⁶, it is possible that this would counterbalance some of the fracturing on the left and make the only viable coalitions grand coalitions, oversized cabinets or more exotic versions like the stoplight coalition mentioned here (or even a CDU/CSU- Greens—FDP coalition like the one in Saarland mentioned earlier). This last particular variant is harder to imagine at the national level given the current political climate in Germany, and it excludes the SPD in any event. Just how likely such a development on the right would be is hard to say. In 2009, the NDP won only 1.5 percent of the list vote.

Still, there exists a substantial electoral movement toward populism in many European countries today, including Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Austria, among others, where small fringe parties have been able to gain an electoral foothold. The 5 percent barrier in Germany has so far kept this development at bay, and may continue to do so in the future. Nevertheless, it is important to note that

⁶ The German electoral system requires that a party win either 4 constituency seats or at least 5 percent of the list vote before becoming eligible for compensatory seats in the list round.

where fringe parties have been successful, like the Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei* / SVP), the late Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* / FPÖ), or Geert Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid* / PVV), governing from the right has become very difficult, and in some instances, grand coalitions and/or short-lived cabinets have been the end result.

Scenario 3: The Collapse of die Linke

As I have mentioned already, die Linke emerged in this election as a viable party, but that emergence has hardly been good news for coalition politics on the left. The former Democratic Socialists (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* / PDS), and successor to the SED of East Germany, who only managed to win 3 constituency seats in East Berlin in 2005, gained 13 new constituencies in 2009 (all from the SPD). They also managed to pull in 9 more list seats after hitting their all-time high water mark in list votes, solidifying them as the fourth largest party in votes and seats. While die Linke still failed to break out of the former east, they did manage to move beyond Berlin for the first time, taking 4 seats from the SPD in Brandenburg, 1 in Mecklenburg Vorpommern, 5 in Sachsen-Anhalt, 2 in Thüringen, and a final flipped seat in Berlin (unifying the former Soviet controlled areas of Berlin under die Linke's representation). And in terms of their list and candidate vote performances, die Linke also increased its share of the vote in the west significantly, often by between 4 and 7 percent of the vote, a near doubling in some of the constituencies that had been, until only recently, much less open to their campaigns.

The direct losses suffered by SPD in the east were remarkable. On average, the SPD lost 13.6 percent of its vote in constituencies die Linke ultimately won. But the indirect effect of die Linke's emergence was probably even more significant. In the east alone, the SPD lost 15 *additional* seats to the CDU by an average of about 10.7 percent of the vote. Even worse, in most of these districts, the SPD went from being the strongest party – considering they won these seats last time around—to third place behind the CDU and die Linke. In other words, the bottom fell out of the SPD campaign in the east. These were wins in 2005 over the CDU by on average about 6 percent of the vote, and in 2009 these seats ended up flipping to the CDU by almost 11 percent—a truly massive swing of on average about 17 percent of the vote.

From the perspective of cleavage politics, there was a second impact of such impressive losses. Each one came in districts where the ultimate combined candidate vote for the three main left bloc parties (the SPD, die Linke, and the Greens) exceeded 50 percent of the final vote (on average it exceeded 55 percent of the vote, in fact). These were, and should have remained, left bloc seats, but the CDU managed to pull out surprising victories due to a combination of factors.

First, turnout was down in all districts in Germany examined in this study, and overall by about 6.9 percent when compared with the 2005 election. This lost turnout had to have affected the SPD disproportionately, as it managed to lose on average about 11 percent of its constituency vote from 2005 to 2009 in the seats that swapped control. It is important to note that the CDU fared better only in the sense that it managed to lose fewer voters than the SPD—on average probably about 2 percent to 3 percent of the vote.

Second, *die Linke* increased its vote by almost 4 percent in the nearly 80 districts the SPD lost control of, and the Greens were very close behind with gains averaging 3.5 percent. We cannot know for certain without individual level data if this combined 7.5 percent increase makes up part of the 11 percent the SPD lost, but it is a safe assumption that the SPD's drop was partly due to their voters staying home or switching their candidate vote to a new party on the left like the Greens or *die Linke*.

Third, and again without individual level data it is impossible to say, but the evidence suggests that more coordination between the CDU and the FDP may have occurred this time around than in previous elections. By examining the percentage of the vote the FDP pulled in with the second vote and comparing their share of the candidate vote in each district, we can see that the FDP managed to 'outperform' their candidate vote in the list round by an average of about 4.6 percent. In other words, the FDP increased its vote share in the list round by more than 4 percent, leaving presumably another 4 percent of voters available to cast their ballots for the CDU candidate in the first vote. And in the former west, where the left vote was overall diminished by a much weaker *die Linke*, the FDP outperformed their candidate vote in the list portion of the ballot by almost 6 percent.

This likely held off similarly depressing numbers for CDU candidates in the west, helping to swing some of the districts from red to black there, and allowing the CDU to beat out both the SPD and *die Linke* in the former east in district after district. Combined, the effects of new gains on the left, depressed SPD turnout, and enhanced coordination on the right between the CDU and the FDP seems to have left the SPD fully in the throes of dark electoral days.

Considering the gains they made in the west, and that they have all but supplanted the SPD in the east as the first option on the left, it is unlikely that *die Linke* would be a candidate for collapse anytime soon. Still, this may be the wake-up call the SPD needs to bring voters back in the next election. *Die Linke* is in a powerful position on the left as virtually any coalition there would need their help. Even so, only 16 of their 76 seats came from district wins. This means that the overwhelming majority of their power rests in the list vote, and so the party remains highly exposed to sudden shifts in popular opinion for the foreseeable future.

Conclusions: A Fourth Scenario?

Given the electoral exposure of die Linke, a fourth scenario may exist for the SPD going forward, although the politics of it would be hard to reconcile for many reasons. Could the SPD and die Linke strike a CDU/CSU Bavarian style bargain, where the SPD would promise not to compete inside of the east (save for West Berlin), if die Linke would vow to not compete in the west? Such a strategy has been discussed before back with die Linke's predecessor, the PDS, and this time around it would have saved the day for the SPD. Table 2 below reports the 15 eastern districts where the CDU managed to win the seat despite extremely strong showings by die Linke.

On average, the CDU won each seat with 32.5 percent of the vote. Die Linke came in second on average with 28.7 percent of the vote, needing only about 4 percent more of the vote to flip the seat back to the left. The SPD on average polled about 24.4 percent. Given the combined strength of die Linke and the SPD, these seats would be completely safe victories for die Linke were they to pick up the SPD's voters in a compromise strategy.

In the west, the SPD lost 49 seats to the CDU by an average margin of about 4.6 percent. Die Linke polled about 8.7 percent on average in these districts, more than enough to make each of these seats competitive again even given the low turnout the SPD must have experienced. Looking at the 49 seats in closer detail, it appears that as many as 33 of these 49 would have gone reliably to the left, meaning at least a net transfer of 48 seats back to the left side of the aisle from the right.

Perhaps more importantly, it would have also likely meant the loss of all or nearly all of the CDU/CSU's overhang seats since the party would have ended up winning a more proportional number of seats in the constituency round. This would have resulted in an additional twenty or so seats knocked off of their Bundestagsfraktion, and would have made a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition a mathematical impossibility even with their extensive cooperation. On the left, the new seat distribution would have meant about 270 combined seats for the new SPD/die Linke partnership, just 30 seats shy of the 300 they would need to govern alone in a Bundestag with 598 members, not 622. The Greens could have easily made up this difference with their 68 seats, returning them to government in a new SPD/Linke-Greens coalition.

This scenario can be seen as a variant on the red-red-green coalition mentioned earlier in this piece, but with an important exception. It provides for a strategy that may help the SPD to change their electoral map substantially and to do so in the near term. Rather than relying on the Greens to overcome their 'trust' issues with die Linke, it would force the issue by formalizing a détente between the SPD and die Linke first. This would leave the Greens with few options for governance outside of

TABLE 2 Fifteen Seats in the East the SPD Lost to the CDU in 2009 (2005 +/-)

District (Land)	SPD lost by (2005 +/-) %	die Linke vote (2005 +/-) %	CDU won seat with %	Combined Vote on Left in 2009 %
Wismar-Nordwestmeck 12 (Mecklenburg Vorpommern)	13.2 (-21.9)	30.1 (+8.2)	33.7	55.0
Swerin-Ludwigslust 13 (Mecklenburg Vorpommern)	3.7 (-17.9)	28.5 (+7.2)	29.3	59.5
Bad Doberan 17 (Mecklenburg Vorpommern)	12.9 (-14.3)	27.3 (+4.3)	34.7	53.9
Elbe-Ester 66 (Brandenburg)	2.0 (-10.9)	28.3 (+2.4)	28.9	58.4
Börde 68 (Sachsen-Anhalt)	10.3 (-19.9)	28.7 (+5.6)	32.7	54.6
Harz 69 (Sachsen-Anhalt)	9.7 (-17.0)	31.1 (+4.8)	33.0	56.9
Dessau 71 (Sachsen-Anhalt)	17.6 (-20.7)	30.5 (+7.1)	36.0	53.0
Burgenland 74 (Sachsen-Anhalt)	14.1 (-16.3)	31.7 (+5.5)	33.0	53.8
Leipzig I 153 (Sachsen)	13.9 (-17.6)	26.6 (+2.7)	33.3	52.9
Leipzig II 154 (Sachsen)	5.8 (-15.5)	25.3 (+2.8)	28.8	60.5
Chemnitz 163 (Sachsen)	14 (-14.4)	27.9 (+1.3)	34.1	54.0
Eisenach 190 (Thüringen)	12.2 (-18.8)	27.6 (+5.2)	34.8	54.0
Gotha 192 (Thüringen)	2.2 (-10.3)	26.1 (+4.7)	29.1	58.4
Erfurt 193 (Thüringen)	8.4 (-12.3)	28.8 (+2.6)	30.8	59.3
Sonneburg 196 (Thüringen)	12.9 (-16.7)	31.2 (+5.3)	31.9	54.1
Average Swing	-16.3%	+4.7%	32.3%	55.9%

Source: *The Federal Returning Officer* available at http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_09/ergebnisse/wahlkreisergebnisse/index.html

the SPD/die Linke. Politically, however, such a big change could likely be seen publicly as a desperation move. Die Linke has never fully dealt with its Communist past, and one could only imagine the kind of political message the right would say such a merger was sending to Germany. A further, and actually formalized and assented-to retrenchment of the once Communist party back into East Germany would likely be sold as politically irresponsible by the right. It would also likely mean solidifying the FDP as a right-only coalition partner, as the economic policies resulting from such a formal agreement between the SPD and die Linke would certainly send the FDP's free market base running for cover. What remains to be seen, then, is whether the SPD and die Linke could use this moment, as one party reaches its nadir and another its relative pinnacle, to synthesize a new start that would help to reconsolidate the crumbling left without alienating their voters in the process.

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