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# **Coalitions – beyond the Politics of Centrality?**

CHARLES LEES

*This article explores a number of themes common to the work of Gordon Smith and to more formal models of coalition behaviour, with an empirical focus on coalition bargaining in the Federal Republic of Germany. The article argues that numerical formation criteria alone are poor predictors of actual coalition outcomes, and that institutional structures and norms - particularly partisan ideology - play a decisive role. The article draws parallels between de Swaan's 'median legislator' theory and Smith's concept of the 'politics of centrality' and comes to two conclusions. First, that the dynamics of coalition behaviour have remained remarkably stable, despite changes in the numerical composition and ideological range of the German party system. Second, that the formation of the Red-Green coalition in 1998 does represent a change in those dynamics, but that there is no evidence to suggest that the Federal Republic is moving beyond the politics of centrality.*

## **Introduction**

Gordon Smith's work, like all the best comparative politics scholarship, has held the line between the two extremes of hyper-empiricism, on the one hand, and over-abstraction on the other. Back in the late 1970s, Smith the political scientist warned his colleagues that 'the pendulum (had) swung too far away' from abstract classification and 'simple typologies'. Such abstractions remained important, not least because 'they ... have the merit of bringing a wide range of experience under a relatively few headings, and give ... a useful summary from which we can proceed to a detailed differentiation' of political phenomena<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, Smith the aesthete rejects the over-use of political science jargon and, when reviewing a book by Ian Budge and Hans Keman some years later, congratulated the authors on avoiding the kind of 'excessively turgid writing that gives comparative politics a bad name in some quarters'<sup>2</sup>.

Budge and Keman's book deals in coalition theory, a sub-field that, at its best, yields up some of the most elegant formal modelling to be found in the discipline but is also prone to the kind of impenetrable techno-babble Smith detests. Broadly speaking, work on coalition theory can be divided into two camps. On the one hand, there is the 'European politics' literature<sup>3</sup>, derived inductively from empirical study of European party systems. On the other, the more rigorous 'game theoretical' approach<sup>4</sup> is grounded in the deductive method and tries - with varying degrees of success - to construct parsimonious models of coalition behaviour that are applicable across time and space. These two approaches are like chalk and cheese, to the extent that Laver and Schofield regard them as 'so far apart that they have almost nothing

to contribute to one another'<sup>5</sup>, despite the efforts of Budge and Keman - and Laver and Schofield themselves - to bridge the divide between them.

I would argue, however, that the gulf between the two approaches is not unbridgeable. Formal theory does not always provide a good 'fit' with the context of European party systems, particularly the role of ideology and other institutional norms but, as Smith insisted over twenty years ago, comparison between systems is impossible without some degree of abstraction. Students of comparative politics will know that Smith's own work - on Germany and Western Europe more generally - has always been theoretically informed.

The rest of this article explores some of the common themes addressed in both Smith's work on coalitions and in some of the more formal-deductive coalition literature. The article takes a thematic approach, starting with Smith's concept of the 'politics of centrality', the centripetal dynamic that he regards as part of the 'efficient secret' of German democracy<sup>6</sup>. It then discusses examines party systems - the political market-places in which coalition bargains are struck - and the role of the parties within them. These issues are examined through the lens of formal 'economic' models of coalition formation, particularly the 'minimum winning coalition' model. The article demonstrates that such models fail to adequately predict or explain coalition politics in the Federal Republic, because they ignore the issues of (partisan) ideology and other institutional norms. These are the rules of the game, and are often where economic models come unstuck: as such rules provide the 'friction' or 'stickiness' that prevents us drawing a direct analogy between party systems and the relatively frictionless markets assumed by neo-classical economics (from which such models are derived). The article goes on to examine the issues of ideology and norms in more detail, whilst introducing a more sophisticated strand of 'policy-oriented' coalition theory: the

'minimum connected winning' and 'median legislator' models. In each segment, the core assumptions of some of the formal models are sketched out and weighed against the empirical work of Smith and associated scholars, with an emphasis on Smith's work on coalition behaviour in the Federal Republic's party system. The article demonstrates that, although they are methodologically distinct from one another, there is much common ground to be found between deductive policy-oriented models and Smith's more inductive approach (in particular, between the median legislator model and Smith's idea of the politics of centrality). Finally, the article concludes with an assessment of whether the idea of the politics of centrality still holds true today.

## **The Politics of Centrality**

Much of Smith's work is concerned with the idea of an 'efficient secret' - a benign configuration of institutional structures and norms, as well as partisan ideology - at the heart of the German polity. It is this secret, which Smith calls 'the politics of centrality', that underpins the remarkable stability of the Federal Republic's political settlement<sup>7</sup>.

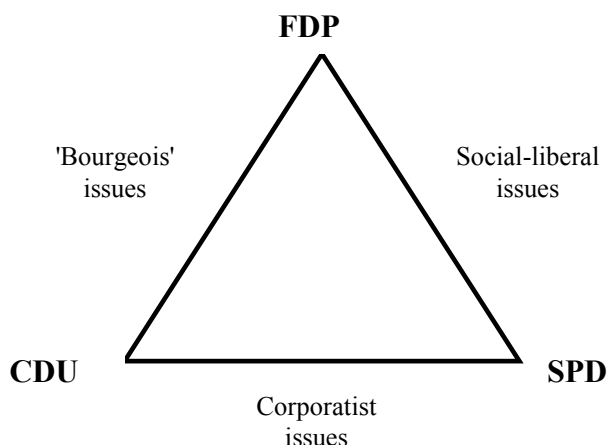
In terms of institutional structures and norms, one can identify four key elements that re-enforce the politics of centrality. First, Germany's system of proportional representation (augmented by a five percent hurdle to representation), which promotes a pattern of coalition government, limits the number of viable parties within the party system, and serves to shut out parties of the extreme right and left<sup>8</sup>. Second, the idea of the *Partienstaat*, which raised the public esteem of political parties in the early post-war years, gave them a direct stake in

the maintenance of the State and the enhancement of its legitimacy, and thus discouraged the emergence of the 'anti-system' sentiment within the parties that helped undermine the Weimar Republic. Third, 'Chancellor democracy' and the principle of *Richtlinienkompetenz*, which established the office of Federal Chancellor as *primus inter pares*, avoiding the constitutional tussles between Chancellor and President that characterised the Weimar years. Fourth, the rule that requires the Bundestag to give a 'constructive vote of no confidence' before voting out an incumbent Chancellor. These four elements serve to narrow the ideological range of 'relevant' parties (parties that are considered to be *koalitionsfähig*), enhance the status of the Federal Chancellor as leader of the governing coalition, and increase the opportunity costs of either exit from an existing coalition or the formation of rival coalitions. Taken together, they foster the qualities of ideological moderation, coalition discipline, and governmental stability<sup>9</sup>.

In the first few decades of the Federal Republic, these qualities came to permeate the ideologies of the traditional mainstream parties, the CDU/CSU, FDP and SPD, all of whom 'share a strong governing orientation'<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the SPD's adoption of the Bad Godesberg programme in 1959 meant that a consensus existed between all of the mainstream parties about the broad parameters of the Federal Republic's political economy. Consensus bred continuity in terms of policy making, which was further reinforced by high levels of coalition stability that led to only 'partial' changes of government (with each new coalition featuring one of the parties from the previous coalition)<sup>11</sup>. Coalition bargaining between the parties involved the selective emphasis of broadly compatible elements within their ideological profiles. Thus, coalition programmes involving the CDU/CSU and FDP focused on 'bourgeois issues', such as property rights, whilst SPD-FDP programmes placed greater stress

on the 'social' dimension, particularly individual rights. The one Grand Coalition to date drew upon the 'corporatist' instincts of both *Volksparteien*, most obviously in the SPD but also to be found within the 'catholic-social' wing of the CDU. In short, a triangular party system evolved in which all three parties were *koalitionsfähig* along one of three dimensions. This idea of a triangular relationship is associated with the work of Franz Pappi<sup>12</sup> and is illustrated in Figure One, below.

**Figure One. The 'Pappi Model' of a triangular party system**



## **The Party System and the role of parties**

*The Party System as a market*

Many formal coalition models build out from Anthony Downs'<sup>13</sup> analogy of party systems as markets, with parties as firms competing with each other for voters who, in turn are analogous with consumers. In the Downsian universe, the policy dimension is laid out one-dimensionally along a single left/right continuum (although later models have often supplemented this with an additional dimension, often based on a authoritarian/libertarian or materialist/post-materialist dimension). Under normal circumstances, it is assumed that the individual voter will have one ideal position along the continuum and that voters' preferences are fairly evenly distributed along it. Theoretically, the distribution of these preferences in normal party systems resembles a classic bell-curve, with the aggregate reaching an equilibrium (and thus effectively a consensus) around the median of the distribution. It is around this point, occupied by the 'median voter'<sup>14</sup>, that the office-seeking parties will manoeuvre in order to maximise votes. By contrast, where an individual voter's preferences on different policy issues are more inconsistent, the bell-curve does not achieve this centrist equilibrium: fragmenting the party system and allowing space within it for extremist parties. In the last years of the Weimar Republic, for instance, this fragmentation was so profound that the centre collapsed and anti-system parties effectively constituted a 'wrecking majority' within the party system<sup>15</sup>.

Like markets, party systems display various degrees of differentiation: defined in such terms as the degree of concentration or deconcentration, partisan alignment or dealignment, dominant or cross-cutting cleavages. Moreover, the opportunity costs of entry into the party system differ across time and space, not only because the appeal of a given political 'product' differs, but also due to system attributes such as voting rules (plurality versus proportional systems), barriers to representation (such as the five percent hurdle at the Federal level in



Germany), laws regulating internal party democracy, and so on. Thus it is important to note that party systems are constrained arenas, in which the composition, stability and durability of coalitions are partly determined by system attributes.

Smith's work on party systems does not use this market analogy, but he nevertheless recognised the importance of system attributes in determining the number of parties within the system, as well as the stability and effectiveness of governmental coalitions. Using a typology based on the ideas of 'governing' and 'social' cohesion, Smith posits four simple classifications to encompass this potential for differentiation across party systems. These are set out in Table One, below. As Smith observes, there is no need for there to be a direct link between levels of governmental and social cohesion. It is possible for a party system dominated by a single party, or small number of parties, to display high levels of governmental cohesion (in terms of stable, durable coalitions) whilst failing to enhance social integration. Conversely, a diffused party system may create high levels of social cohesion - in the sense that all shades of political opinion have an effective 'voice' within the system - but not deliver the goods in terms of stable government.

**Table One. The Major West European Types<sup>16</sup>**

↑ Governing cohesion	Dominance	Majoritarian
	(Imbalanced)	
↑	Fragmentation	Diffusion
	→	→
	Social cohesion	

Smith considers majoritarian systems - displaying high levels of cohesion on both dimensions - to be the ideal type, as they deliver stable government and an integrated electorate. Majoritarian systems are often associated with two-party systems, but can work under certain circumstances in multi-party systems. Thus the Federal Republic's party system, dominated by two 'balanced clusters'<sup>17</sup> of parties, fulfils the criteria of a majoritarian system. At the time of writing, Smith was referring to the cluster of the SPD and FDP in coalition, with the CDU/CSU in opposition. Obviously, the decline of the total *Volkspartei* vote since then, and the subsequent emergence of the Greens and PDS has changed this dynamic somewhat (this is discussed later in the article). Nevertheless, Smith's assertion can be supported by the kind of market analogy posited by Downs and others. High levels of governmental cohesion increase the opportunity costs of entry into, and exit from, a given coalition, whilst high levels of social cohesion raises the opportunity costs for new entrants into the political market-place<sup>18</sup>. Combined together, majoritarian systems can create a virtuous circle of coalition stability and duration. The corollary to this is that under such systems the number of potential coalitions that can form is limited. Continuing the market analogy, if majoritarian party systems are markets they are not open ones.

### *Political parties as firms*

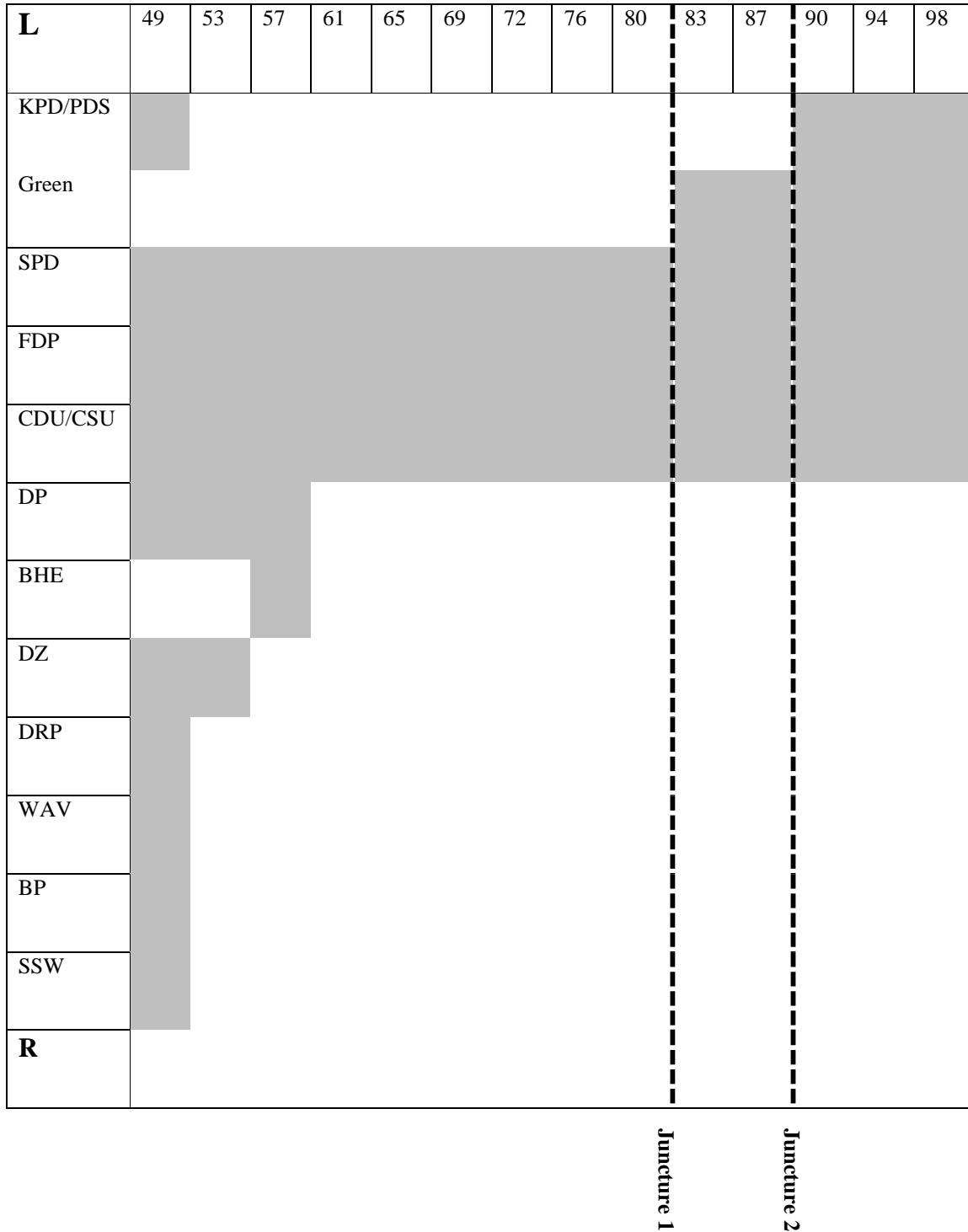
Neo-classical economic theory often assumes the existence of perfect competition within markets, but in practice this is often not the case. Markets are often oligopolistic, in other words dominated by a small number of large firms. In some cases, they are characterised by the presence of cartels, groups of firms that co-operate together in order to 'rig' the market and shut out potential competitors. In relatively open economies, oligopolistic markets are

tolerated, but cartels are looked upon as undesirable and regulators often act to break them up. Nevertheless, cartel-like activity continues to take place in many markets.

The analogy of the oligopolistic market is easily applied to the German party system - especially at the Federal level. Table Two, below, demonstrates how the political market place

**Table Two. The Rise and Decline of the German 'Party Oligopoly'.**

**Federal Elections: 1949-1998**



became increasingly dominated by a limited number of parties during the first three decades after the establishment of the Federal Republic. I call this state of affairs a 'party oligopoly'. However, the last two decades have been marked by two systemic junctures that have served to undermine this party oligopoly. The first, in 1983, took place when the Greens entered the Bundestag following the federal elections of that year. The second, in 1990, took place after the first all-German Federal elections, when the PDS entered the Bundestag. The table demonstrates, first, a thirty year period of ongoing party system concentration, in which the picture is one party oligopoly, dominated by the two big *Volksparteien*, and, second, the two systemic junctures which have served to break down this party oligopoly and shift the centre of gravity within the party system towards the political left.

#### *Consequences for numerical coalition formation criteria*

Despite this shift to the political left over the last twenty years, it was not until 1998 that the right-of-centre Kohl government was unseated by the SPD and Greens. One can think of two obvious reasons why this might be the case: first, that the numerical composition of the Federal Republic's party system did not change sufficiently to oust the Kohl government and, second, that there were ideological constraints that prevented the formation of an alternative coalition.

Let us leave aside the issue of ideology (which is discussed later in this article) for the moment, and concentrate on the number of parties within the party system. Theorists such as Riker<sup>19</sup> and Gamson<sup>20</sup> concentrate on coalition size as being the key structural attribute that determines coalition formation. All parties are assumed to be office seeking and will attempt

to gain admission to any coalition that may form. Riker predicts that parties will try to create coalitions that are only as large as they believe will ensure winning, in order to maximise the payoffs to each coalition member. In its pure theoretical form, this will result in a 'minimum winning' coalition of 50 percent plus one vote. However, in practice, Riker accepts that slightly larger 'minimal winning' coalitions are more likely to form. Gamson gives the coalition formation 'game' a different emphasis and argues that parties will try and form a 'cheapest winning' coalition. The key difference is that Gamson assumes that parties would rather be a relatively large member of a small coalition than a junior partner in a bigger coalition, even when the tangible benefits of doing so are broadly comparable. If numerical criteria are decisive in determining the number and composition of possible coalitions within a given party system, one of the logical consequences of a party oligopoly is that this number will be limited. Likewise, as an oligopoly breaks down, the possibilities should increase. Indeed, in game theoretical terms, the expansion of the party system from three to five parties should increase this number exponentially<sup>21</sup>. However, if one looks at the actual size and composition of coalitions formed over this period at the Federal level, this is not the case. These are set out in Table Three, below.

If one regards the CDU/CSU's combined Bundestag faction as effectively a single party, Table Three demonstrates that, throughout the period from 1949 to the present, the numerical composition of ruling Federal-level coalitions remains remarkably stable. It is true that the numerical range includes a maximum of four parties during the period October 1953 to October 1957 and an effective one-party government from July 1960 to November 1961, but the default number of parties in formal coalitions over this period is two (in 16 out of 19,

or 84 percent of the total ). Moreover, all coalitions since 1961 have been composed of two parties.

**Table Three. The Composition of Federal-level Coalitions 1949-1998<sup>22</sup>**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Chancellor</i>	<i>Parties</i>	<i>No. of Parties*</i>
Sept. 1949	Adenauer I	CDU/CSU, FDP, DP	3
Oct. 1953	Adenauer II	CDU/CSU, FDP/FVP, DP, BHE	4
Oct. 1957	Adenauer III	CDU/CSU, DP	2 (1) **
Nov. 1961	Adenauer IV	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Oct. 1963	Erhard I	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Oct. 1965	Erhard II	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Dec. 1966	Kiesinger	CDU/CSU, SPD	2
Oct. 1969	Brandt I	SPD, FDP	2
Dec. 1972	Brandt II	SPD, FDP	2
May 1974	Schmidt I	SPD, FDP	2
Dec. 1976	Schmidt II	SPD, FDP	2
Nov. 1980	Schmidt III	SPD, FDP	2
Oct. 1982	Kohl I	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Mar. 1983	Kohl II	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Mar. 1987	Kohl III	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Apr. 1989	Kohl IV	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Dec. 1990	Kohl V	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
May. 1992	Kohl VI	CDU/CSU, FDP	2
Sept. 1998	Schröder I	SPD, Greens	2

\*CDU/CSU treated as single party (based on Bundestag faction arrangements); \*\* the DP split in July 1960, with the majority of the party joining the CDU - effectively making Adenauer III a single-party government.

*From party oligopoly to party cartel?*

System attributes, such as the five percent hurdle to representation and the tendency for 'overhang votes' to favour the big *Volksparteien*, have contributed to the closure of the party

system in the Federal Republic. Nevertheless, over time two new competitors have entered the electoral market, with the subsequent erosion of the party oligopoly noted earlier. So how is one to explain such high levels of coalition stability in the face of these changes?

The numerical criteria posited by Riker and Gamson only provide a partial explanation. There have been two periods when Federal-level coalitions have, contrary to Riker and Gamson's predictions, constituted 'surplus majorities' – first, in the early years of the Federal Republic and, second, in the mid-to-late 1960s. One explanation for this is that such surplus majorities allow the 'senior' party to absorb the smaller parties with which it is in coalition. This would certainly explain the behaviour of the early Adenauer coalitions where, in a period of ongoing party system concentration, surplus majorities allowed the CDU to absorb smaller competitor parties on the political right<sup>23</sup>. However, it would not explain the period of Grand Coalition between 1966 and 1969. A more plausible explanation for both periods of surplus majority government is that such large majorities provide a 'comfort zone' for coalition management in times of political upheaval. This explanation would account for both Adenauer II (1953-7) and the Kiesinger coalition<sup>24</sup>.

If one discounts these two periods, Federal-level coalitions have avoided excessive surplus majorities. Therefore, to some extent, Riker and Gamson's assertions appear to be supported by the evidence. However, whilst avoiding unnecessarily large majorities, not all of the remaining coalitions formed over this period conform to the 'minimal winning' formula. This is particularly the case since the first juncture in 1983, when the Greens entered the Bundestag, thus increasing the number of potential coalition variants. The disparity between theoretical and actual winning coalitions is set out in Table Four, below.



**Table Four. Bundestag Elections 1983-98<sup>25</sup>. Predicted and Actual Coalition Outcomes (using numerical formation criteria)**

	<i>Date of Bundestag Election</i>				
	06/03/83	25/01/87	02/12/90	16/10/94	27/09/98
	<i>Seats in Bundestag</i>				
<u>CDU/CSU</u>	244	223	319	294	245
<u>FDP</u>	34	46	79	47	44
<u>SPD</u>	193	186	239	252	298
<u>Greens</u>	27	42	8	49	47
<u>PDS</u>	---	---	17	30	35
<u>Total Seats</u>	498	497	662	672	669
<u>Minimum Winner</u>	250	249	332	337	335
<u>Minimal Winner</u>	SPD, FDP, Greens	CDU/CSU, Greens	SPD, FDP, PDS	CDU/CSU, FDP	CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens
<u>Surplus Majority</u>	4	16	3	4	1
<u>Actual Winner</u>	CDU/CSU, FDP	CDU/CSU, FDP	CDU/CSU, FDP	CDU/CSU, FDP	SPD, Greens
<u>Surplus Majority</u>	28	20	66	4	10
<u>Predicted?</u>	No	No	No	Yes	No

Table Four demonstrates that only one of the actual coalitions formed after the last five Bundestag elections is the minimal winner in theoretical terms. So how does one account for this? One explanation is that, as the cosy party oligopoly has broken down over the last twenty years, the established parties have turned to cartel-like behaviour. The analogy of the cartel was introduced into the party systems literature some years ago by Katz and Mair<sup>26</sup>. 'Cartel parties' are characterised by elite dominance, a centralised structure and a high degree

of alienation between office holding politicians and their activists. Activists retain a high symbolic value as the legitimator of elites, but they are increasingly by-passed by them - especially when elites intend to co-operate with elites from other parties. The cartel party model does not map exactly onto German parties, not least because the German federal structure is replicated within the parties themselves, thus weakening central control. Nevertheless, in terms of elite dominance and conditions of alienation between party elites and the membership, all of the major parties - including the Greens - conform to some degree to the cartel party model<sup>27</sup>.

However, there are two problems with the cartel-party as an explanation for the persistence of surplus majority coalitions since 1983. First, the marginalisation of the ordinary membership has made it easier for party elites to pursue strategies of political co-operation with each other, including forming coalitions<sup>28</sup>. The logic of the cartel party model is that party elites are able to forge coalition agreements in the face of opposition from the membership: in other words, party elites enjoy a high degree of autonomy. Therefore, the cartel party model *per se* does not necessarily predict a closing of coalition options, given that elite autonomy might increase the number of possible coalitions that could form (as the membership has little or no veto power over potential coalitions). The second problem is that the cartel party model does not provide an explanation for why parties would act in ways that are, on the face of it, against their interests - either by joining surplus majority coalitions when they could be members of alternatives with a smaller majority (like the FDP in 1983 and the Greens in 1998), or by inviting 'junior' parties to join a coalition when other small parties would provide a smaller majority (as the CDU/CSU did in 1987, and the SPD did in 1998).

Clearly, there are other system attributes at work - relating to partisan ideology and other institutional norms.

## **Ideology and Institutional Norms**

### *Policy-oriented coalition models*

Table Four demonstrates what coalition theorists have known since the 1960s - that models based on numerical formation criteria alone are not only poor predictors of coalition outcomes, they also have very little explanatory value. Because of this, theorists began to factor in some kind of 'policy dimension'. Early policy-oriented work, such as that by Axelrod<sup>29</sup>, builds upon office-seeking models and introduces the policy dimension as a secondary formation criterion. His model assumes that office-seeking remains the central strategic goal of all players, but members of the successful coalition will ideally be adjacent to one another along a single Downsian Left-Right ideological continuum – in other words they will be 'ideologically adjacent'. Such ideological adjacency will serve to minimise conflicts of interest. Therefore, Axelrod's model predicts that the 'minimal connected winning' coalition will be the most likely outcome<sup>30</sup>.

Although Axelrod's model assumes ideological adjacency, it has no conception of the ideological distance between parties and cannot pick up the nuances of ideological conflict. However, subsequent work by de Swaan<sup>31</sup> takes the potential for conflict between ideologically adjacent parties into account. De Swaan argues that winning coalitions will be those that are not only a minimal connected winning option (after Axelrod) but are also,

*ceteris paribus*, the option with the smallest ideological range. The policy dimension remains a single Downsian Left-Right axis, running from progressivism to conservatism and all parties are assumed to be rational actors – with transitive preference orderings of all potential coalitions, based upon their relative proximity to the median or 'Mparty' within the legislature. De Swaan's 'median legislator' or 'median party' model assumes that the party that controls the median legislator in any potential coalition is decisive because it blocks the axis along which any connected winning coalition must form. Any party that is the 'Mparty' (median within the legislature) and, in particular, the 'Mparty(k)' (controlling the median legislator within a potential coalition) must be included in any ideologically connected winning coalition.

The 'median legislator' model has considerable predictive power across time and space. Over thirty years ago, de Swaan's own tests yielded a 69 per cent prediction rate of actual outcomes from data on European coalition processes<sup>32</sup>. Because of this predictive power, the 'median legislator' model has become part of the theoretical toolkit for researchers of coalition behaviour in many European polities. In the German context, a good example of this is the relatively recent work by Klingemann and Volkens on Federal-level coalitions. Using data from the period 1949 to 1987, Klingemann and Volkens demonstrate that all Federal-level coalitions that formed during this period contained the party controlling the median legislator within the Bundestag<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, the Mparty has normally been the FDP.

#### *Bringing Smith back in*

Klingemann and Volkens' analysis of Federal-level coalitions is arrived at deductively, building on formal theoretical models. This is quite different from the more inductive

methodology of Smith's work. Nevertheless, the conclusions they come to are complementary to those put forward by Smith and others. In particular, there are strong parallels between the logical consequences of the 'median legislator' model and the actual coalition outcomes that Smith attributed to the Federal Republic's 'politics of centrality'.

It was noted earlier in the article that key system attributes - such as proportional representation (and the five percent hurdle), the idea of the *Partienstaat*, 'Chancellor democracy' and the principle of *Richtlinienkompetenz*, and the the rule that requires the Bundestag to give a 'constructive vote of no confidence' - serve to narrow the ideological range of 'relevant' parties, enhance the status of the Chancellor as leader of the coalition, as well as increase the opportunity costs of both exit from an existing coalition and the formation of rival coalitions. Taken together, they encourage the qualities of ideological moderation, coalition discipline, and governmental stability that Smith has called the politics of centrality. Thus, from the early 1950s and until the early 1980s, the three main parties coalesced around the political centre in the kind of triangular relationship described in the Pappi model.

However, as already noted, the net effect of the two historical junctures of 1983 and 1990 was both to break up this cosy party oligopoly, and to move the centre of gravity within the party system to the political left. Nevertheless, it would take another fifteen years for these systemic changes to manifest themselves in coalition terms at the Federal level.

One reason for this was party ideology. As Smith notes, for historical reasons, all three mainstream parties adhere to the principle of 'militant democracy', one of the manifestations of which is an intolerance of parties considered to be insufficiently *staatserthaltend*<sup>34</sup>. This shunning of 'outsider' parties<sup>34</sup> was particularly acute at the Federal

level and served to isolate the Greens throughout the 1980s and, subsequently, the PDS after 1990. Thus the real coalition 'win set', made up of parties with sufficient democratic credentials, remained limited long after the original triangular party system began to break down. As has been discussed elsewhere, the shutting out of the Greens and PDS benefited the CDU/CSU, as it denied the SPD potential coalition options on the political left<sup>35</sup>. The fact that the SPD acquiesced in this is evidence of the degree to which it has become intimately associated with the dominant ideology of the Federal Republic over the last fifty years.

The other reason, however, was purely mathematical. Up until the 1998 Bundestag elections, the balance of party weights within the legislature was such that the FDP retained its Mparty status and remained in government. This is in keeping with the pattern identified by Klingemann and Volkens, noted earlier. The period from 1983 to 1998 was characterised by both an uninterrupted sequence of CDU/CSU-FDP coalitions and also a phase of electoral decline for the SPD. As a result, it was not until the 1998 elections that the SPD could muster enough seats in the Bundestag to unseat the incumbent coalition. However, as Table Five (below) indicates, the 1998 elections brought about three other changes. First, the status of Mparty moved from the FDP to the SPD – signalling that the shift to the political left within the party system had finally manifested itself in terms of seats in the Bundestag. Second, unlike the FDP, the SPD was not only the Mparty, it was also Mparty(k) - making its inclusion in any ideologically connected minimal winning coalition inevitable. Third, the new Red-Green coalition signalled a subtle change in the dynamics of coalition formation in the Federal Republic. On the one hand, the presence of the SPD in the new coalition was in keeping with the established pattern of the party 'owning' the median legislator in the Bundestag being a member of any coalition that formed. However, in choosing the Greens as

their junior partner, the SPD has totally dissolved the old coalition rather than including one of the incumbent

**Table Five. Bundestag Elections 1983-98<sup>36</sup>. Predicted and Actual Coalition Outcomes (using policy-oriented formation criteria)**

	<i>Date of Bundestag Election</i>				
	06/03/83	25/01/87	02/12/90	16/10/94	27/09/98
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<u>Total Seats</u>	498	497	662	672	669
<u>Minimum Winner</u>	250	249	332	337	335
<u>Mparty</u>	FDP	FDP	FDP	FDP	SPD
<u>Mparty(k)?</u>	No	No	No	No	Yes
<u>Coalition</u>	CDU/CSU-FDP	CDU/CSU-FDP	CDU/CSU-FDP	CDU/CSU-FDP	SPD-Greens
<u>Degree of Change</u>	None	None	None	None	Total

parties (the obvious candidate being the FDP). This was not, to use Smith's terminology, the 'partial' change of government that has become the norm in the Federal Republic, but a wholesale change. As a result, for the time being at least one of the constituent parts of Smith's idea of the politics of centrality is missing: the Mparty (the epitome of 'centrality') remains in government, but there is no continuity of membership between outgoing and incoming coalitions.



## **Conclusion: Beyond the Politics of Centrality?**

It remains to be seen how significant the changes of September 1998 will turn out to be. One explanation is that 1998 was a one-off election, where the changes noted earlier were forced upon the parties involved, with the proviso that future elections will see a return to the status quo ante. There is evidence to support this. The Red-Green coalition was not the smallest connected winning option that could have formed – an SPD-FDP coalition would have been three seats smaller (although the difference would not have been large enough to have a significant impact on payoffs). Moreover, many in the SPD – including Gerhard Schröder – had expressed misgivings about the suitability of the Greens as a coalition partner at the Federal level (although SPD activists were more enthusiastic)<sup>37</sup>. It remains unclear why the FDP ruled out the option of a coalition with the SPD. Ideological differences might have come into play, and there is evidence of a degree of animosity between Schröder and some FDP politicians going back to his days as Minister President of Lower Saxony<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, it has been clear for many years that the FDP tends to suffer at the polls when it defects from an established coalition<sup>39</sup>. One could argue that a combination of all of these factors might have made an SPD-FDP coalition impossible at the time. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to rule it out in the future.

The other explanation is more profound. For some time, there has been speculation that the extraordinary dominance of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl over the period 1983–1998 masked a fundamental change in the dynamics of the party system at the Federal level<sup>40</sup>. Thus, whilst the emergence of the Greens and PDS led to the creation of significant new coalition arrangements at the *Länder* level<sup>41</sup>, the balance of power at the Federal level

appeared frozen. With Kohl no longer a major player, what we are now seeing is the emergence of a more polarised 'two-bloc' system, with a centre-right bloc consisting of the CDU/CSU and FDP confronting a centre-left bloc made up of the SPD, Greens and PDS. Of course the PDS is still currently beyond the pale at the Federal level, but is increasingly *koalitionsfähig* in the *Länder*. If this was to eventually happen at the Federal level as well, the SPD would benefit from another potential partner on the left.

Taken to its logical conclusion, two potential scenarios arise from this second explanation. The first is that it would be very bad news for the FDP. If the fluidity of the old triangular relationship between the parties has been replaced by a more rigid left-right divide, the FDP's former position as 'kingmaker' and 'liberal corrective' would be under threat. Moreover, if that was the case, the rationale for voting FDP at all would be far weaker, with many voters eschewing the Liberal monkey for the Christian Democratic organ-grinder. The consequences for the FDP under those circumstances would be clear. The second scenario is that the Greens would find it very difficult to usurp the FDP's kingmaker role, a course advocated by moderates like Joschka Fischer. Indeed there would be very little point in trying, given the disappearance of the old triangular dynamic.

If these two scenarios were to come to pass, the Federal Republic's party system would have moved beyond the 'politics of centrality'. But one Bundestag election is not enough evidence on which to base such a conclusion and, as already noted, the next Bundestag elections may see a return to a more familiar coalition arrangement at the Federal level. Yet even if this is not the case, a return to power of the current Red-Green coalition would in itself fit the pattern of stable coalition arrangements that has become the norm since the foundation of the Federal Republic. As such, it would not signal the end of the politics of centrality. On

the contrary, it would be an indication of the underlying stability and integrative power of what still remains the Federal Republic's efficient secret.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, G. 'Western European party systems: on the trail of a typology' *West European Politics* 2, 1. (January 1979a).

<sup>2</sup> Smith, G. Book Review (Budge, I. and Keman, H. (1990) *Parties and Democracy: Coalition and Government Formation in Twenty States*. Oxford University Press) *West European Politics* 14, 2. (April 1991).

<sup>3</sup> see Dodd, L.C. 1976: *Coalitions In Parliamentary Government*. Princeton University Press; Pridham, G. (ed.). 1986: *Coalition Behaviour In Theory And Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> see Riker, W. H. 1962: *The Theory Of Political Coalitions*. Yale University Press; Axelrod, R., 1970: *Conflict Of Interest*. Markham; de Swaan, A. 1973: *Coalition Theories And Cabinet Formation*. Elsevier.

<sup>5</sup> Laver, M. And Schofield, N. 1990: *Multi-Party Government: The Politics Of Coalition In Europe*. Oxford University Press. pp: 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, G. 'Does Western German democracy have an 'efficient secret'?' *West European Politics* 4, 2. (May 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Smith, G., 1986 *Democracy in Western Germany* (3rd edition). Heinemann: 231-5.

<sup>8</sup> Because of its concentrated support in the new *Länder*, the PDS is an exception to this rule. Moreover, its recent public apologies for the actions of the former GDR regime indicate a willingness to move towards the political centre and become more *koalitionsfähig*.

<sup>9</sup> See Smith, G. 1979b *Democracy in Western Germany* (1st Edition): Chapters two, Four and Five, Klingemann, H-D. and Volkens, A. in Laver, M. and Budge, I. (eds.), 1992 Op Cit: 1993-4; Lees, C. 2001 Op Cit: Chapters Two and Three.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, G., 1986 Op Cit: 144

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 145.

<sup>12</sup> Pappi, F-U., 'The West German Party System'. *West European Politics*. (October, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Downs, A. 1957: *An Economic Theory Of Democracy*. Harper And Row.

<sup>14</sup> The gist of the median voter theorem is that the median voter, who has an equal number of voters on each side, is in a privileged position because he/she can vote down alternatives to both the right and the left. The ideal point of the median voter is the equilibrium outcome under majority rule.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, G. 1979b. Op cit: 22.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, G. 1979a. Op Cit. p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.135.

<sup>18</sup> A high level of social cohesion implies a well-integrated electorate. This reduces the amount of unoccupied political space within which a new party can mobilise support.

<sup>19</sup> Riker, W. H. 1962: *The Theory Of Political Coalitions*. Yale University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Gamson, W. A. 'A Theory Of Coalition Formation'. *American Sociological Review*. 26. (1961): 373-82.

<sup>21</sup> see Schubik, 1967: 249 cited in Hinckley, B. 1981: *Coalitions And Politics*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 24. Martin Schubik's model vividly demonstrates the problem of predicting coalition outcomes in multi-party systems, even when the rules are very simple. The most simple coalition game is one in which each player must only make a 'yes/no' decision about whether to join with each other player in the bargaining set. Shubik calculated a general formulation for such games as giving  $2n - 1$  possible outcomes. Thus, even the most simple  $n$ -person game quickly becomes unwieldy.

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<sup>22</sup> Table adapted from Smith, G., 1986, *Democracy in Western Germany* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Gower: 146. Data for coalitions from March 1983 onwards, adapted from Webb, A., 1998, *The Longman Companion to Germany since 1945*. Longman: 112-15.

<sup>23</sup> Klingemann, H-D. and Volkens, A. 'Coalition governments in the Federal Republic of Germany: does policy matter' in Laver, M. and Budge, I. (eds.), 1992: *Party Policy and Government Coalitions*. St. Martin's Press; 190.

<sup>24</sup> Adenauer II oversaw the thorny issue of West German re-armament, whilst Kiesinger's Grand Coalition had to tackle a slow down in economic growth and the subsequent period of 'Concerted Action'. The high salience of both issues held out the risk of coalition 'defections'. In these circumstances, it can be argued that a surplus majority is more effective. Moreover, over-large majorities made it easier for these governing coalitions to achieve the two-thirds majority in the *Bundestag* required for constitutional amendments associated with their programmes.

<sup>25</sup> Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen.

<sup>26</sup> Katz, R. and Mair, P. 'Changing models of party organisation and party democracy: the emergence of the Cartel Party'. *Party Politics* 1,1 (January 1995).

<sup>27</sup> see Lees, C. 2000, *The Red-Green Coalition in Germany: Politics, Personalities and Power*. Manchester University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. For a more detailed account of the effect of German Federalism on party organisation see Lees, C. 'Social Democracy and Structures of Governance in Britain and Germany: how institutions and norms shape political innovation' in Martell et al (eds.) 2001, *Social Democracy: Global and National perspectives*. Palgrave.

<sup>29</sup> Axelrod, R., 1970: *Conflict Of Interest*. Markham.

<sup>30</sup> Axelrod's 'minimal connected winning' model performs better than pure minimal winning models in predicting actual outcomes of cabinet formation, but the underlying assumption that minimal connected winning coalitions have lower levels of conflicts of interest has been empirically challenged.

<sup>31</sup> de Swaan, A. 1973: *Coalition Theories And Cabinet Formation*. Elsevier.

<sup>32</sup> see Browne, E.C. 1973: *Coalition Theories: A Logical And Empirical Critique*. Sage: 76.

<sup>33</sup> see Klingemann, H-D. and Volkens, A. 'Coalition governments in the Federal Republic of Germany: does policy matter' in Laver, M. and Budge, I. (eds.), 1992 Op Cit.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, G., 1979b Op Cit: 215.

<sup>35</sup> See Lees, C. 1998: *Red-Green Coalitions in the Federal Republic of Germany: Models of Formation and Maintenance*. Doctoral Thesis. University of Birmingham; also Lees, C. 'Bringing the PDS into the coalition equation' in *German Politics* Vol. 4. No. 1. (1995): 150-154.

<sup>36</sup> Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen.

<sup>37</sup> Lees, C., 1999: 'The Red-Green Coalition' in Padgett, S. and Saalfeld, T. (eds.) *Bundestagswahl '98: The End of an Era*. Frank Cass.

<sup>38</sup> see Lees, C. 1998; 2000 Op Cit.

<sup>39</sup> see Padgett, S. (ed.), 1993: *Parties and Party Systems in the New Germany*. Dartmouth.

<sup>40</sup> See Bürklin, W. and Roth, D. (eds.), 1993: *Das Superwahljahr: Deutschland vor unkalkulierbaren Regierungsmehrheiten*. Bund Verlag; Dalton, R. 'Two German electorates?' in Smith, G., Paterson, W. E. et al (eds.), 1992: *Developments In German Politics*. Macmillan; Eilfort, M., 'Politikverdrossenheit and the non-voter', in Roberts, G. (ed.), 1995: *Superwahljahr: the German Elections in 1994*. Frank Cass; Hübner, E. and Oberreuter, H. (eds.), 1992: *Parteien in Deutschland zwischen Kontinuität und Wandel*. Bayerische Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit; Schmidt, M., 1992: 'Political consequences of Unification', in *West European Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 4: 1-15.

<sup>41</sup> see Lees, C. 2000 Op Cit; Downs, W. M., 1998: *Coalition Government Subnational Style: Multiparty Politics in Europe's Regional Parliaments*, Ohio State University Press.