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Chancellor Hegemony: Party Politics and the Bundestag Party System after the 2013 Federal Election

Charles Lees, Department of Politics, Languages, and International Studies,
University of Bath

Abstract

The eighteenth Bundestag elections of 22 September 2013 brought important changes to the Bundestag party system, some of which are contingent but others of which are more systemic and profound. The narrow failure of the FDP to scale the electoral threshold has had an impact on coalition negotiations and the improvement in the overall vote share for the CDU/CSU and the SPD, for the first time since the 1960s represents a significant, if probably only temporary, concentration of the German party system in the Bundestag. More systemically, the election saw a continuation of the ongoing redistribution of voting power in the Bundestag in favor of the catch-all parties as *formateurs*, despite the steady decline in the catch-all party vote. The article also discusses how the increased importance of the potential *formateur* parties has gone hand-in-hand with a greater focus on the individual leading candidates, and concludes that this is particularly good news for the CDU/CSU, given the political qualities of Angela Merkel and the failure of the SPD to find and support a leading candidate that can match her political acumen.

Keywords

Germany; Party systems; CDU/CSU; SPD; Elections; Campaigns; Coalitions;

Merkel

Introduction

The triumph of the right-of-center Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and their Bavarian sister-party the Christian Social Union (CSU) in the eighteenth Bundestag election of 22 September 2013 and the subsequent return for a third term in office of CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel was to all intents and purposes a foregone conclusion long before polling day.¹ Germany's impressive economic performance in the years leading up to the election, as well as the political acumen of Merkel and the singular incompetence of her main opponents, the left-of-center Social Democratic Party of

Germany (SPD), had led to a series of impressive opinion poll leads for Merkel and her party. There were no game changing gaffes or scandals during the campaign and the sense of inevitability around a Merkel victory led many observers to complain about the so-called “strategic demobilization” of the CDU campaign and the apparent disengagement and apathy it had created.

At the same time, however, off-the-record briefings by the major polling organizations in the week before the election pointed to an underlying potential for upsets on election night. The first and most striking possibility was that the newly formed and explicitly Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD) might enter the Bundestag. The AfD had been polling consistently around the 4.5 to 4.7 percent level and it was suspected by pollsters that these numbers were actually underestimates due to the reluctance of respondents to admit support for such a party in traditionally pro-EU Germany. As a result, it was felt that the scenario of the AfD scaling Germany’s five percent electoral hurdle was a very real one. The other possibility was that Merkel’s junior coalition partners, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), might fail to scale the 5 percent hurdle and, in the absence of any directly elected seats, be excluded from the Bundestag for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic. This possibility was considered less likely than an AfD breakthrough but was intriguing, given the way that in the final days of the campaign Merkel appeared to campaign aggressively for both first and second votes under Germany’s mixed member proportional electoral system and, thus, reduce the incentive for CDU/CSU voters to “loan” their second vote to the FDP.

The eventual results of the 2013 federal election and changes in vote share from the previous election in 2009 are set out in Figure 1.

(Figure 1 here)

The figure shows that the CDU/CSU was the clear winner, polling 41.5 percent of the vote (up 7.7 percent on 2009) and narrowly missing out on an absolute majority in parliament. The SPD did less well, up 2.7 percent on 2009 to 25.7 percent. The smaller parties also did relatively badly, with the FDP down 9.8 percent to 4.8 percent, the Left Party down 3.3 percent on 8.6 percent, and Alliance 90/the Greens down 2.3 percent on 8.4 percent. The AfD narrowly failed to enter parliament with 4.7 percent, whilst other parties (including the troubled Pirates with 2.2 percent) polled 6.3 percent. The turnout rate was 71.5 percent was a little higher than 2009's all-time low of 70.8 percent.

(Table 1 here)

Table 1 shows the subsequent distribution of seats in the Bundestag. With 311 seats, the CDU/CSU fell five seats short of an overall majority of 316 (50 percent plus one in the 631 seat parliament) but still gained an extra sixty-two seats on the 2009 total. The SPD won 193 seats, up forty-six on 2009. The FDP failed to enter the Bundestag, while the Left Party won sixty-four seats (down twelve) and the Greens sixty-three (down five). Thus, the 2013 Bundestag elections had generated two major changes to the Bundestag party system. First, and most obviously, the FDP's failure to enter the Bundestag for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic has had an impact on coalition negotiations, albeit less as a "liberal corrective" to and "majority creator" for the CDU/CSU and SPD and more because it would have been a potential coalition

partner for the CDU/CSU. Second, a much less remarked-upon but still significant development was that for the first time since the 1960s, both catch-all parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, improved their vote share and subsequent number of seats in the Bundestag. This represents a significant concentration of the German party system in the Bundestag and, although quite likely to be a temporary development, as argued below, it represents a halt in the process of deconcentration that has taken place over the last half a century.

Historical Development of the Party System in Germany

Patterns of competition and cooperation within the German party system(s) have changed a great deal over time. From 1949 until the late 1970s, Germany underwent a thirty-year period of party system concentration, in which the two big catch-all parties dominated the party system, with the FDP playing a balancing or “corrective” role between them. Two systemic junctures then took place that broke down this dominance. The first of these junctures took place in 1983, with the entry of the Greens into the Bundestag, and the second took place in 1990, following German Unification, with the entry of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), now the Left Party.²

The main cleavages within the German party system had traditionally been those of class (in particular, when meditated through trade union membership) and religion (displaying the artefacts of both a centuries-old Protestant/Catholic cleavage and also a more recent divide between voters close to the Churches and non-believers),

although the influence of these two major cleavages have faded considerably since the late 1960s. German Unification in 1990 resulted in the emergence of a distinct territorial cleavage within the party system, which was most apparent when comparing state-level party systems in the former West Germany and those in the new federal states in the east of the country. This cleavage has blurred a little in recent years, not least as the Left Party has made (very limited) inroads into state-level party systems in the west. But we can still discern two very distinct types of party system at the state level of politics: with a four-party system, made up of the Greens, SPD, CDU/CSU, and FDP, in the states of the old West Germany and a three-party system made up of the Left Party, SPD, and CDU, in the new states in the east.³

(Figure 2 here)

Figure 2 maps out the development of the party system in the Bundestag over the period 1949 to 2013. The figure demonstrates that in the early years of the Federal Republic, the party system underwent dual processes of ideological moderation (in terms of the ideological range of the parties represented) and of consolidation (in terms of the number of parties represented and, to a lesser extent, the relative volatility in the numbers of seats won by them).

So we can see how smaller right wing and/or particularist parties such as the German Law/Imperial Party (Deutsche Rechtspartei/Reichspartei, DRP), Economic Reconstruction Coalition (Wirtschaftliche Aufbau-Vereinigung, WAV), the Bavaria Party (BP), the South Schleswig Voters Confederation (Südschleswigscher Wählerverband/Sydslesvigsk Vælgerforening, SSW), and the German Center Party (Deutsche Zentrumspartei, DZ) were initially represented in the Bundestag but within

a relatively short period of time had either disbanded, been absorbed by the CDU/CSU, or lost popularity to the extent that they were no longer able to scale the Federal Republic's election threshold (5 percent of the vote or three directly elected seats). The conservative German Party (Deutsche Partei, DP) was more resilient and remained in the Bundestag for over a decade and even participated in government on more than one occasion but it too was eventually squeezed out. And on the left the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) also dropped out permanently from the Bundestag party system after just one parliamentary term. There was then almost twenty years of the so-called Pappi model⁴ before the two historical junctures described earlier, which brought first the Greens and then the PDS (later the Left Party) into the Bundestag.

The result of the two junctures, especially the second juncture of German Unification, is a Bundestag that is larger (currently 631 seats compared with 402 in 1949), with an ideological center of gravity that has moved somewhat to the left, and—up until September 2013—six parties in five party groupings (CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left Party) instead of four parties in three groupings. The shocking failure of the FDP to scale the electoral threshold has reduced that to five parties in four groupings in the current Bundestag although, as already noted, if the FDP and the AfD had gained just 0.6 percent more of the vote between them we would now be looking at a seven party system in the Bundestag.

Winning Coalitions and Voting Power in the Bundestag Party System

The changing composition of the Bundestag party system is reflected in the number of coalition options available to the parties and the amount of voting power they enjoy. To demonstrate this, Figure 2 sets out the number of minimal winning coalitions and coalitions with swing in the Bundestag party system, 1949 to 2013. The results of the first Bundestag election in 1949 yielded twenty-six minimal winning coalitions and 197 coalitions with swing but this broad sweep of coalition options had been narrowed to three minimal winning coalitions and three coalitions with swing by 1961, heralding the onset of the twenty years of three-party competition associated with the Pappi model. The first critical juncture, in which the Greens entered the Bundestag in 1983, increased the number of minimal winning coalitions to four and the number of coalitions with swing to seven. German unification, and the emergence of the PDS, added to the increased fragmentation of the party system and the 1990 Bundestag election produced a substantially enlarged legislature containing four minimal winning coalitions and fourteen coalitions with swing. The 1994 and 1998 elections produced the same number of each type of coalition and subsequent elections have seen a pattern of trendless fluctuation. The 2002 election yielded a reduction in the number of minimal winners to three and the number of coalitions with swing to twelve, the 2005 election saw an increase of minimal winners to seven—although the number of coalitions with swing remained the same—and the 2009 election produced a Bundestag with only four minimal winners and fourteen coalitions with swing. The eighteenth Bundestag election of September 2013 yielded a legislature with four minimal winners and only seven coalitions with swing.

(Figure Three here)

Figure 3 demonstrates that, despite the emergence and consolidation of two new political parties over the last thirty years, contemporary Germany's fluid party system⁵--characterized by the erosion of partisan identification, greater electoral instability, and a decline in the vote share enjoyed by the catch-all parties—has not generated the kind of fragmentation seen in the Bundestag in the early years of the Federal Republic. Although there have been instances, such as in 2009, when the number of coalitions with swing has been more than four times greater than it was during the years of the Pappi model, in the current Bundestag, it is only just over twice as high, whilst the number of potential minimal winning outcomes has only been slightly higher throughout the period.

(Table 2 here)

The changing number of minimal winning coalitions and coalitions with swing has had an impact on the distribution of power between the parties in the Bundestag. Table 2 presents normalized Banzhaf indices of “voting I-power,” defined as the degree to which a given voter—in this instance, a political party—can influence the outcome of any vote in a given voting body⁶ for the main German parties in the German Bundestag over the history of the Federal Republic from 1949 until the 2013 Federal election. The table demonstrates a long-term process of concentration of I-power around the two main catch-all parties, in particular the CDU/CSU. Thus, in the initial period of party system concentration from 1949 until 1961, the distribution of I-power was in flux, with no clear discernible pattern from election to election. From 1961 until 1980, during the period of the Pappi model, we can see a period of stability in which I-power was evenly distributed between the two big catch-all parties and the FDP. The emergence in Germany of today's more fluid party system, however, has

actually led to a greater concentration of I-power around the catch-all parties, with one of the two catch-all parties enjoying a score of 0.5 (50 percent of voting power: effectively a veto-playing position) in all but one of the nine elections that have taken place since 1982. This means that none of the smaller parties (the FDP, Greens, and Left Party) have been able to assume the “kingmaker” function played by the FDP in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, following the 2013 Bundestag election, and with the FDP out of the Bundestag for the first time, the CDU/CSU’s score was 0.5, reflecting its narrow failure to secure an absolute majority in the chamber.

The Increased Personalization of German Party Politics

The changes in the distribution of power in the Bundestag described have favored the largest party as *formateur* within any subsequent coalition game, as the smaller parties are not able to exert the kind of credible threat of defection that the FDP had been able to deploy under the Pappi model. The increased importance of the potential *formateur* parties over the last three decades has gone hand-in-hand with another phenomenon: a greater focus on the individual leading candidates, particularly the so-called “chancellor candidates” and the increased salience of so-called chancellor effects in the determination of vote choice.⁷

There is no doubt that perceptions of competence and candidate preferences have played an important role in German electoral politics for some time. Oscar Gabriel’s⁸ study of multiple Bundestag elections examined the changing relationship between partisan identification, policy issues, and perceptions of candidates and demonstrated

that when partisans registered positive feelings of identification for “their” party, combined with positive perceptions of party competence and party candidates, the estimated likelihood of these individuals voting for their party was over 90 percent and in some instances was as high as 99 percent. Positive perceptions of candidate competence when mediated by issue preferences were strongly and positively related to vote choice, raising the likelihood of voting for a particular party rising by anything up to 40 percent (for the SPD in 1983), whilst negative perceptions depressed the estimated likelihood of voting by anything up to 21 percent (the CDU/CSU in 1983). Most strikingly, candidate preferences alone increased the likelihood of voting for a particular party by up to 25 percent (the CDU, again in 1983).

Gabriel also compared candidate effects in the “old” and “new” federal states after 1990 and concluded that the importance of voters’ perceptions of candidates was even greater in the new states, where settled patterns of partisanship are much weaker than in the “old” Federal Republic. Moreover, the author found that the impact of perceptions of competence and candidate preferences had an asymmetric impact on support for the two parties in the new states, with a strong candidate preference loading disproportionately on to the CDU/CSU vote (75 percent) compared with that for the SPD (62 percent)⁹.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the mainstream parties have adapted to the increasing personalization of party competition. Thus, in the 1994 Bundestag election the CDU/CSU devoted almost 10 percent of its election budget to Helmut Kohl’s speech-delivering campaign.¹⁰ Parties increasingly commissioned television and radio spots on private broadcasters such as SAT1 and RTL+ , stations, which are far more

likely than the state-owned ARD and ZDF to emphasize personalities over issues.¹¹ As already noted, over the period when Joschka Fischer dominated the Greens, they too developed a heavily personalized campaign message, for instance fighting the 2002 Bundestag election under the slogan “the second vote is a Joschka vote” (*Zweitstimme ist Joschkastimme*).¹² In the same election, SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder exploited his own popularity by portraying the election as a straight fight between him and the CDU/CSU’s chancellor candidate Edmund Stoiber. Thus, although the SPD in 2002 was unpopular compared with the 1998 election, Schröder enjoyed a clear lead over Stoiber in terms of general candidate preferences and most specific evaluations of competence.¹³ Similar dynamics can be seen in subsequent federal elections,¹⁴ although Schröder’s attempt to reprise the “straight fight” narrative against the CDU/CSU’s chancellor candidate Angela Merkel did not prevent a narrow defeat in the 2005 Bundestag election.

Merkel’s own nonideological style of politics stressed her calm personality and perceived competence and downgraded the importance of both the CDU/CSU as a party and the distinctiveness of its party program. The personalization of the CDU/CSU’s campaigning in the subsequent 2009 and 2013 Bundestag elections proved a challenge to the SPD, which fielded the highly respected but uninspiring Frank-Walter Steinmeier in 2009 and the more colorful Peer Steinbrück in 2013. Neither candidate was able to counter the cult of personality that has emerged around Merkel.

Thus, analysis of the eighteenth Bundestag election demonstrates that, on a scale between plus 5 and minus 5, Merkel enjoyed a net approval rating of plus 2.1 amongst all voters and 3.9 amongst her own supporters. By contrast Steinbrück only managed

to achieve borderline net approval (0.7) in the electorate as a whole and lukewarm support (2.6) amongst his own supporters. If we examine preferences for the two candidates by party affiliation, we find that double the number of voters (60 percent to 31 percent) preferred Merkel. This included 97 percent of CDU/CSU voters, 90 percent of FDP voters, and 60 percent of voters for the AfD. Even Left Party voters were evenly split with 43 percent preferring either candidate. The only good news for Steinbrück was that 78 percent of SPD voters and 52 percent of Greens voters preferred him to Merkel, which in itself is not a ringing endorsement of his candidacy. In terms of the personal attributes of the candidates, Merkel trumped Steinbrück on sympathetic character (52 percent to 18 percent), trustworthiness (40 percent to 13 percent), ability to deal with the Euro crisis (42 percent to 12 percent), decisiveness (54 percent to 17 percent), technical competence (40 percent to 13 percent), ability to create jobs (41 percent to 11 percent), and to tackle future problems (38 percent to 16 percent).

These numbers for the leading candidates of the two catch-all parties were far more skewed than the data comparing the parties themselves. The CDU/CSU was considered more competent on employment policy (40 percent to 22 percent), the Eurocrisis (38 percent to 20 percent), and the economy in general (47 percent to 17 percent), but the parties were much closer on issues such as pensions (29 percent to 25 percent), families (30 percent to 29 percent), and tax (32 percent to 27 percent). Moreover, as would be expected, the SPD was ahead of the CDU/CSU on social justice (35 percent to 26 percent).¹⁵

At the time of writing, there is not yet any reliable published research that assesses the relative impact of partisan identification, policy issues, and perceptions of candidates on vote choice in the 2013 Bundestag election and compares this with earlier elections in the Federal Republic. Until there is we must be cautious in our conclusions. Nevertheless, what we can say is that perceptions of candidates have impacted upon vote choice in the Federal Republic for many decades. Moreover, although there does appear to be a link between this phenomenon and a decline in or absence of partisan identification, these candidate effects appear to be stronger amongst CDU/CSU identifiers than it is amongst SPD identifiers. All of the mainstream parties have reoriented their campaigns to emphasize the personal qualities and attributes of their candidates, particularly the chancellor candidates of the two catch-all parties. Where this has been particularly successful, such as with Helmut Kohl in the 1990 and 1994 elections, Gerhard Schröder in 2002, or Angela Merkel in 2009 and 2013, it is perhaps also because it was consistent with what voters perceived to be these chancellors' true natures, as it were. Thus, although party campaign strategies have become more sophisticated in recent years, their impact is mediated through the personal qualities of the leading candidates.

Conclusions

The actual outcome of the 2013 parliamentary elections has brought important changes to the Bundestag party system, some of which are contingent but others of which are more systemic and profound. In terms of contingency, the failure of the FDP to scale the electoral threshold has had an impact on coalition negotiations, but less as

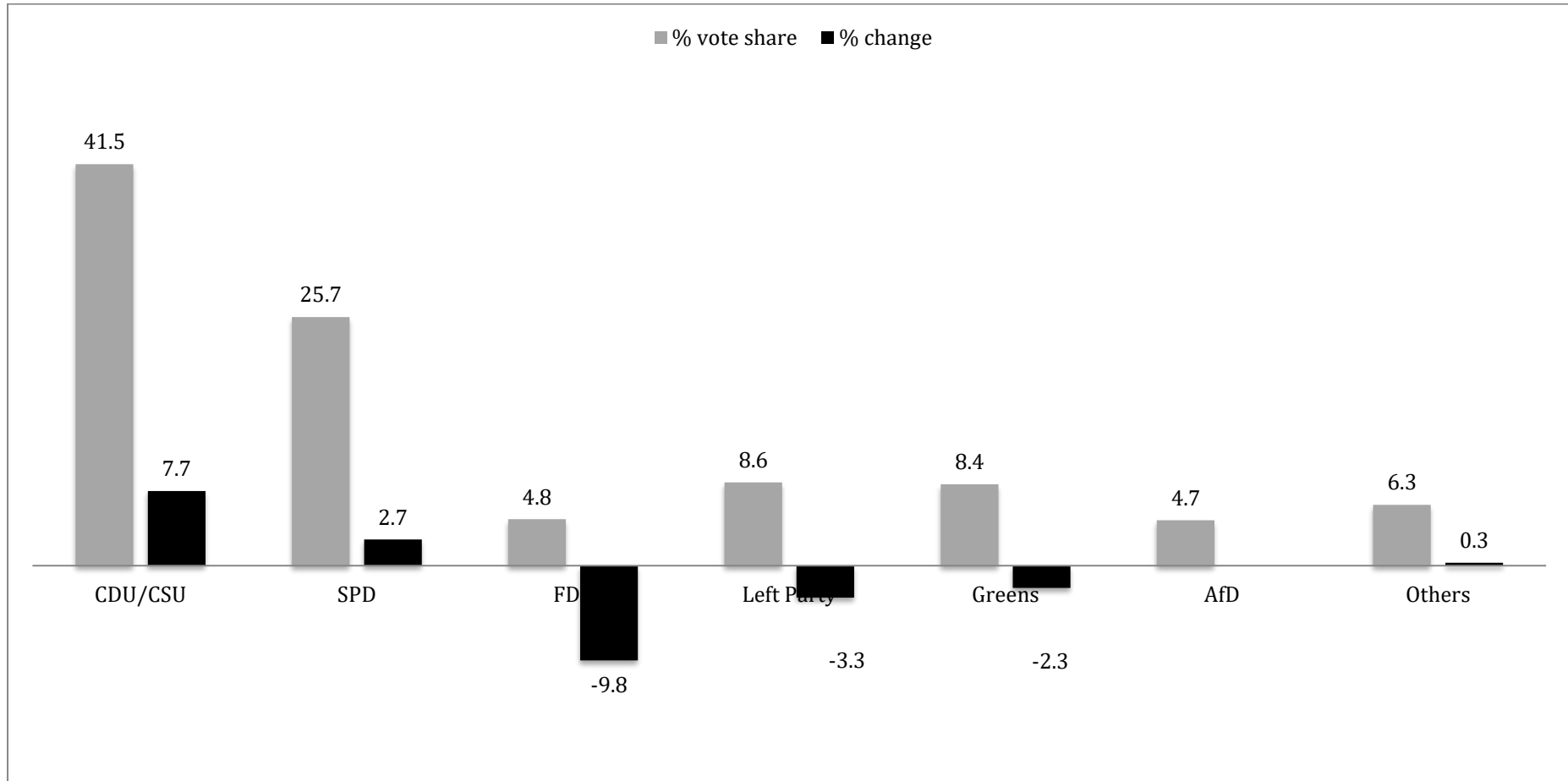
the traditional “liberal corrective” to and “majority creator” for the CDU/CSU and SPD and more as a lost coalition option for the CDU/CSU. Moreover, as already argued, if the FDP and the AfD had gained just 0.6 percent more of the vote between them we have a seven party/six grouping system in the Bundestag. Another development that might well be contingent but is nevertheless of great importance is the improvement in the overall vote share for the CDU/CSU and the SPD, for the first time since the 1960s. This represents a significant, if probably only temporary, concentration of the German party system in the Bundestag.

More systemic, in that it has been a feature of the Bundestag party system since the 1980s, is the ongoing redistribution of voting power in favor of the catch-all parties as *formateurs*, as the smaller parties are unable to deploy credible threats of defection. This development has been described in the past as “paradoxical,”¹⁶ as it goes hand-in-hand with what had been a steady decline in the catch-all party vote but, as we have seen, the relative deconcentration of Bundestag party system has not generated the large number of minimal winning coalitions and coalitions with swing that existed in the early years of the Bundestag. The article also noted that the increased importance of the potential *formateur* parties coincided with a greater focus on the individual leading candidates, although the effectiveness of this personalization of campaigning remains dependent on the political qualities of the leading candidates.

To conclude, all of these developments represent a reaffirmation of the two catch-all parties within the Bundestag party system and is particularly good news for the CDU/CSU, given the political qualities of Merkel and the failure of the SPD to find and support a leading candidate that can match her for political acumen. Some years ago,

Karl-Rudolf Korte described politics in the Federal Republic as being traditionally “a parliamentary governmental system with chancellor hegemony.”¹⁷ With the exception of the Adenauer period and perhaps also of Kohl in his heyday as the “unity chancellor,” it is hard to recall a period of postwar German politics when these hegemonic qualities have been more apparent than they are today.

Figure 1: The eighteenth Bundestag Election of 22 September 2013: Percent Vote Share and Percent Change since 2009



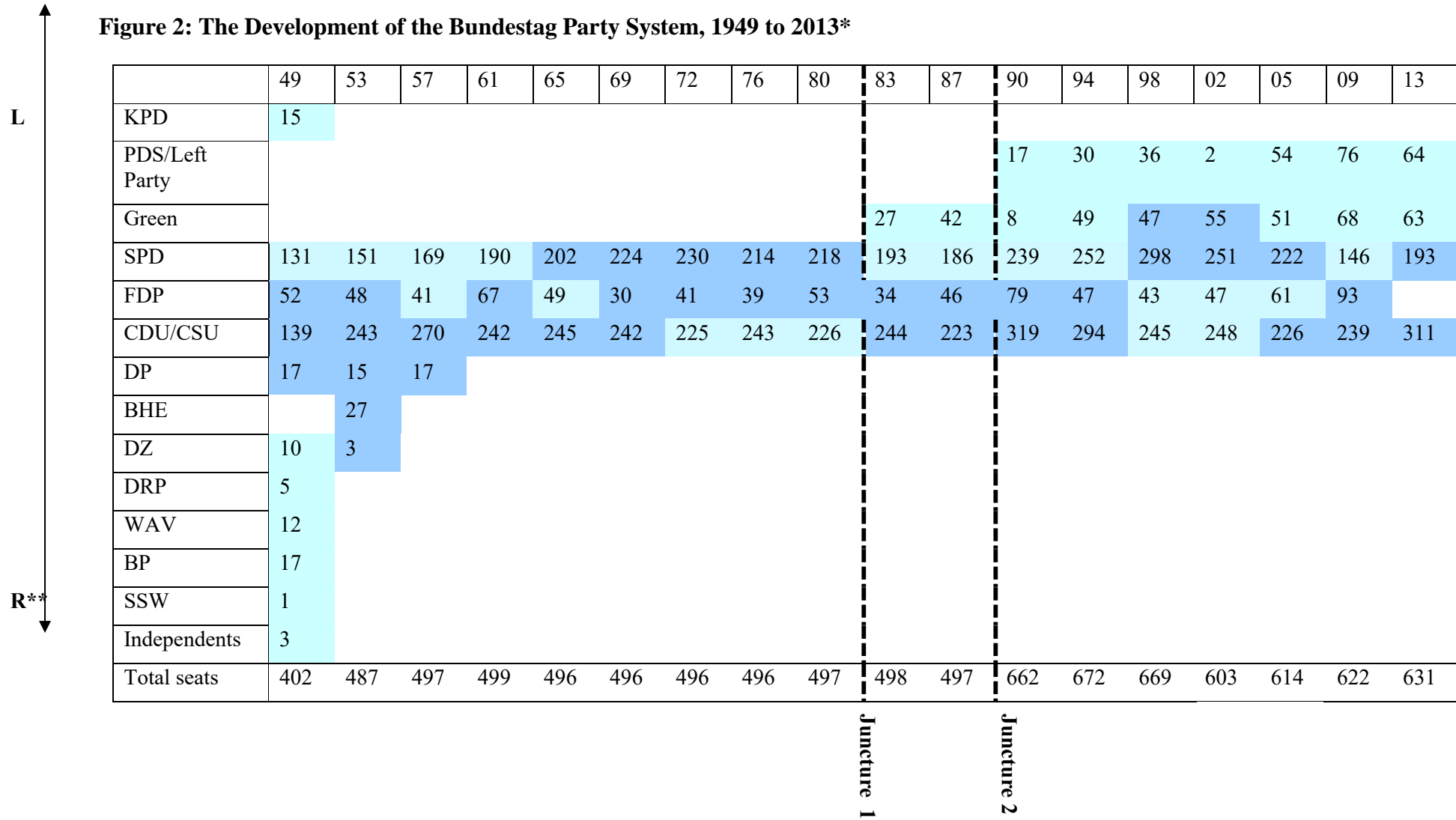
Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen

Table 1: The eighteenth Bundestag Election of 22 September 2013: Distribution of Seats in the Bundestag and Change from 2009

	<u>2013</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>Change</u>
CDU/CSU	311	249	62
SPD	193	146	47
FDP	0	93	-93
Left Party	64	76	-12
Greens	63	68	-5
Total:	631	622	8

Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen

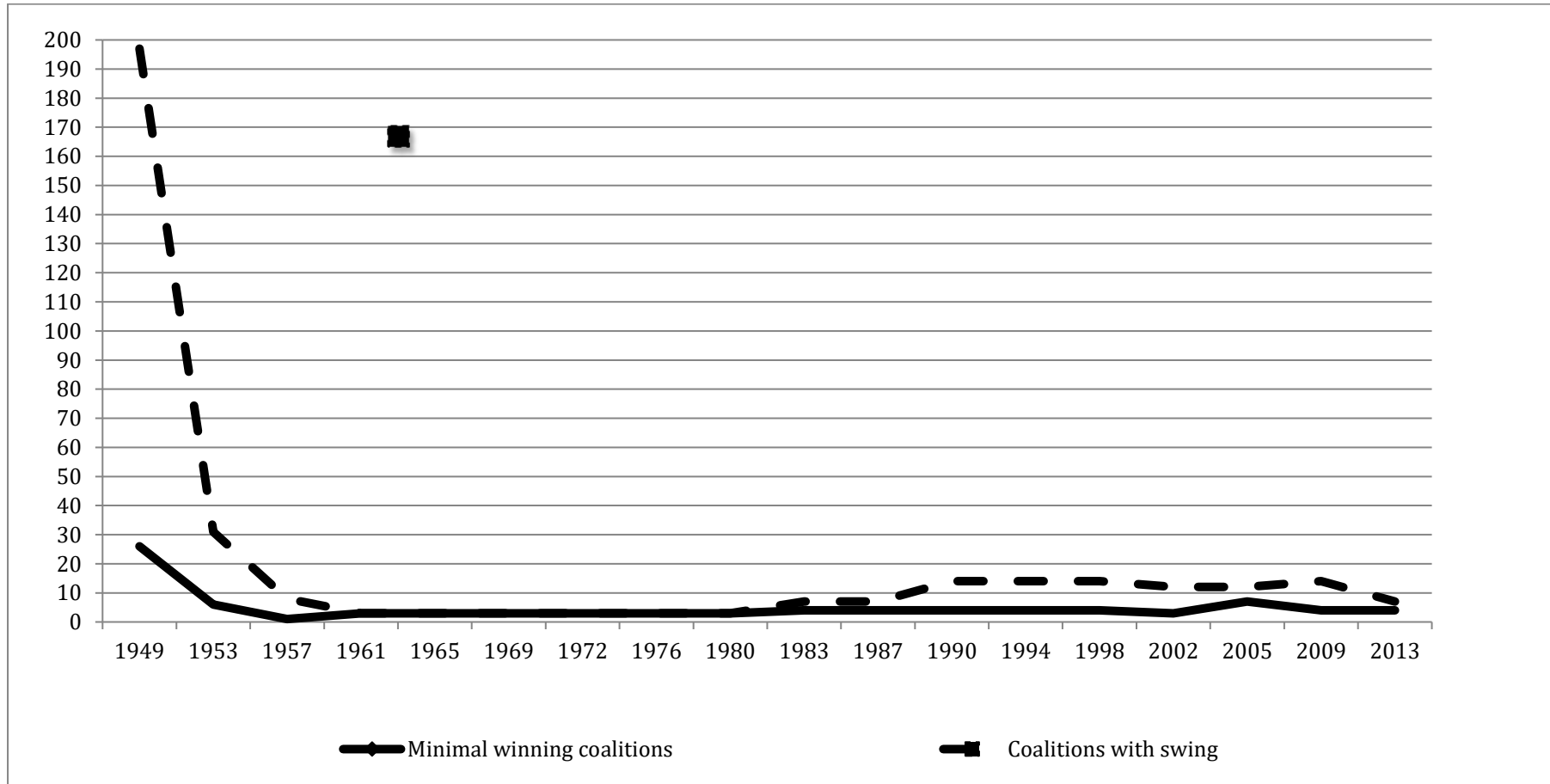
Figure 2: The Development of the Bundestag Party System, 1949 to 2013*



** Parties in Bundestag in pale blue; number of seats in cells (excluding Berlin deputies); parties in government in darker blue.*

*** For taxonomical reasons, the particularist parties such as the BP and SSW and independents have been placed on the right of the left-right spectrum.*

Figure 3: Number of Minimal Winning Coalitions and Coalitions with Swing in the Bundestag Party System, 1949 to 2013



Source: data from the Bundeswahlleiter; coalitions calculated using the Voting Power and Power Index Website, Antti Pajala, University of Turku, <http://powerslave.val.utu.fi/>.

Table 2: Voting I-power in the German Bundestag: Normalised Banzhaf scores, 1949-2013

<u>Election</u>	<u>CDU/CSU</u>	<u>SPD</u>	<u>FDP</u>	<u>Greens</u>	<u>PDS/Left Party</u>
1949	0.3082	0.2594	0.2373	0	0
1953	0.75	0.05	0.05	0	0
1957	0.1	0.1	0.1	0	0
1961	0.3333	0.3333	0.3333	0	0
1965	0.3333	0.3333	0.3333	0	0
1969	0.3333	0.3333	0.3333	0	0
1972	0.3333	0.3333	0.3333	0	0
1976	0.3333	0.3333	0.3333	0	0
1980	0.3333	0.3333	0.3333	0	0
1983	0.5	0.1667	0.1667	0.1667	0
1987	0.5	0.1667	0.1667	0.1667	0
1990	0.5	0.1667	0.1667	0	0.1667
1994	0.5	0.1667	0.1667	0.1667	0
1998	0.1667	0.5	0.1667	0.1667	0
2002	0.3333	0.3333	0	0.3333	0
2005	0.5	0.5	0.25	0.25	0.25
2009	0.5	0.1667	0.1667	0	0.1667
2013	0.5	0.1667	0	0.1667	0.1667

Source: data from the Bundeswahlleiter; coalitions calculated using the Voting Power and Power Index Website, Antti Pajala, University of

Turku, <http://powerslave.val.utu.fi/>.

Notes

¹ This article uses data partly sourced as part of an election observation delegation arranged by the International Association for the Study of German Politics (<http://www.iasgp.org>) and very kindly funded by the German Academic Exchange Service, the DAAD.

² Charles Lees, *Party Politics in Germany –a Comparative Politics Approach* (Basingstoke, 2005).

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⁴ Franz Urban Pappi, “The West German Party System,” *West European Politics* 7 (1984): 7-26.

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⁶ Dan S. Felsenthal and Moshé Machover, *The Measurement of Voting Power: Theory and Practice, Problems and Paradoxes* (Cheltenham, 1998).

⁷ Thorsten Faas and Jürgen Maier, “Chancellor-candidates in the 2002 televised debates” in *Bundestagswahl 2002: the Battle of the Candidates*, ed. Thomas Saalfeld and Charles Lees (London, 2004), 300-316.

⁸ Oscar Gabriel, “Parteiidentifikation, Kandidaten und politische Sachfragen als Bestimmungsfaktoren des Parteienwettbewerbs” in *Parteiendemokratie in Deutschland*, ed. Oscar Gabriel et al. (Opladen, 1997).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 247 -249

¹⁰ Bernhard Boll, “Media communication and personality marketing: the 1994 German national election campaign” in *Superwahljahr: the German Elections in 1994*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (London, 1995), 138.

¹¹ Holli Semetko and Klaus Schoenbach, “Parties, leaders, and issues in the news” in *Bundestagswahl '98: End of an Era?*, ed. Stephen Padgett and Thomas Saalfeld (London, 1999), 86.

¹² See Lees (see note 2).

¹³ Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2002.

¹⁴ Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2005, 2009, 2013.

¹⁵ Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2013.

¹⁶ See Lees (see note 3).

¹⁷ Karl-Rudolf Korte, “Solutions for the decision dilemma: political styles of Germany’s chancellors,” *German Politics* 9, no. 1 (2005): 5.