

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly follows the shape of a map of Europe.

## Lost in the New Five-Party System?

Coalition Options and Strategies of the German Social Democratic Party in the Run-up to the 2013 Federal Elections

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- The party groups in the European Parliament can be divided into six party families: social democrats, conservatives, liberals, greens, left-wing socialists and right-wing populists. In some countries, there are also regional parties. In these circumstances, even just arithmetically the weakened major parties are likely to need not just one, but two smaller coalition partners to form a government.
- Even though coalition strategies always depend on the particular national context the social democrats in Europe, as a result of the pluralization of party systems, face challenges on several fronts in the competition for voters.
- Coalition strategies in the German party system would appear to be particularly complicated. First, parties have to declare their willingness to enter into coalition before the election; second, since the establishment of the Linkspartei (Left Party) the old arithmetic no longer applies; and third, coalition strategies are further hindered by interactions and interrelations between federal and regional politics.
- In Germany, as things stand at the moment, the SPD cannot count on the ability or willingness of either the Linkspartei or the Greens to form a coalition. Preventing the Greens from migrating to the centre-right camp requires a strategy of, in effect, »partnership between competitors« in order to nurture the core Red–Green alliance.





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## 1. The Electoral Decline of Social Democracy

The previous century has often been referred to as the »Century of Social Democracy«. Authors such as Ralf Dahrendorf have posited that the age of social democracy would irrevocably come to an end upon entering the new millennium. This prognosis was based on two interlinking arguments. The first asserts the exhaustion of the intellectual resources of the Left, after their reform ideas were implemented step-by-step in the course of the twentieth century: the Social Democrats therefore could be seen as victims of their own success. The second argument alleges an irreversible transformation of the social and economic conditions that fostered the success of past social democratic politics. The Keynesian concept of demand management »in one country«, on which the social reform project of the welfare state was based, economically, was robbed of its underpinnings through the globalisation of the finance, goods and commodities markets and replaced by a new »supply-side« paradigm. This paradigm put the emphasis on freedom of the market and worked to the advantage of the conservative/ right-wing parties, who pushed the social democrats out of power in most European countries in the early 1980s.

Parallel to or even leading up to this development, the cleavages and milieus which had generated the former labour parties, and in turn served as these parties' basis of support, were increasingly losing their mobilising power. Based on the extensive literature on the forms and causes of this social uprooting (which will not be elaborated further here), one can point to a number of key phenomena. They include tertiarisation, development and expansion of the welfare state, individualisation, secularisation and shifts in values. They can be summed up by the term »pluralisation«. Accordingly, the politicised social structure has become increasingly diffuse, meaning that societal groups and milieus can no longer be classified in terms of a coherent »social« or »class« structure (cf. Pappi 2002: 41). Thus, while the socio-economic conflict »dissipates« into a number of distributive cleavages, in which various groups demonstrate ever fewer interest overlaps, cultural orientations and lifestyles become concomitantly more diverse. At the same time, the socio-economic and culture/social-value dimensions have decoupled, as a result of which only limited conclusions can be drawn about an individual's values and preferences on the basis of their socio-economic position.

This certainly does not mean that socio-structural features are irrelevant with regard to voters' behaviour. The decline in the size of loyal party bases in the electorate, however, shows that the »loyal voter« has lost significance, both qualitatively and quantitatively. On the one hand, the core clientele for social democratic parties – the industrial labour force – from which they once recruited their mass support base, has decreased; on the other hand, the voters from this section of society are nowadays much less reliable social-democratic supporters. In the 1970s, this development was more or less unproblematic since, at the same time, social democrats were gaining access to new electoral bases. But this worked only as long as the economy flourished, providing enough to distribute among all groups. When that condition was no longer met and parts of society began to question the principle of growth in general, the social democrats' programmatic balancing act became all the more difficult. By continuing with their course of programmatic opening, they increasingly ran the risk of alienating their loyal supporters.

Election results and government participation reflect this dilemma only in part. At the end of the 1990s, the social democrats appeared to have climbed back to the top. At the beginning of 1999, they were in government in all EU countries except for Spain and Ireland. They regained the majority in Great Britain and Germany after being in opposition for 12 and 16 years, respectively, and completely drove the Centre-right out of government in Italy for the first time since the Second World War. This renaissance had three interlinked causes. First, the parties on the Right had passed their sell-by date in government. Since the drawbacks of their reforms had become increasingly apparent, social democrats were able to profit from widespread voter dissatisfaction. Second, the newly-emerged populist Right presented conservatives with a threatening competitor, who weakened their integrative power within their own political camp. Third, social democrats had edged nearer to the right-wing opposition's political programme by more or less tacitly adopting the »achievements« of neoliberal modernisation.

The dream of a new social democratic Europe did not last long, however. By 1999, the change in government in Austria had already initiated the tide of change. Two years later, the left-wing parties in Norway, Denmark and Italy were pushed out of office, followed by Portugal, France and the Netherlands in 2002, Germany in 2009

and finally Great Britain in 2010. That the social democrats' electoral losses during this decade were twice as high as during the 1980s was primarily due to the loss of respect and trust among their traditional voters. Indeed, the parties had initiated or continued efforts to reform and restructure the welfare state and they strove to make these measures compatible with their own party programmes and/or acceptable to the wider public. But they did so only retrospectively, that is, upon encountering broad opposition due to these reforms, or they failed to compensate social welfare cuts through redistribution in other policy areas and an overall policy of equal opportunity. In addition, even among the upwardly mobile middle classes, widely won over by the social democrats, the majority of voters were disappointed and shunned the social democrats at the next elections. The social democrats therefore had to ask themselves whether they had pursued the »wrong« electoral bases (Allen 2009).

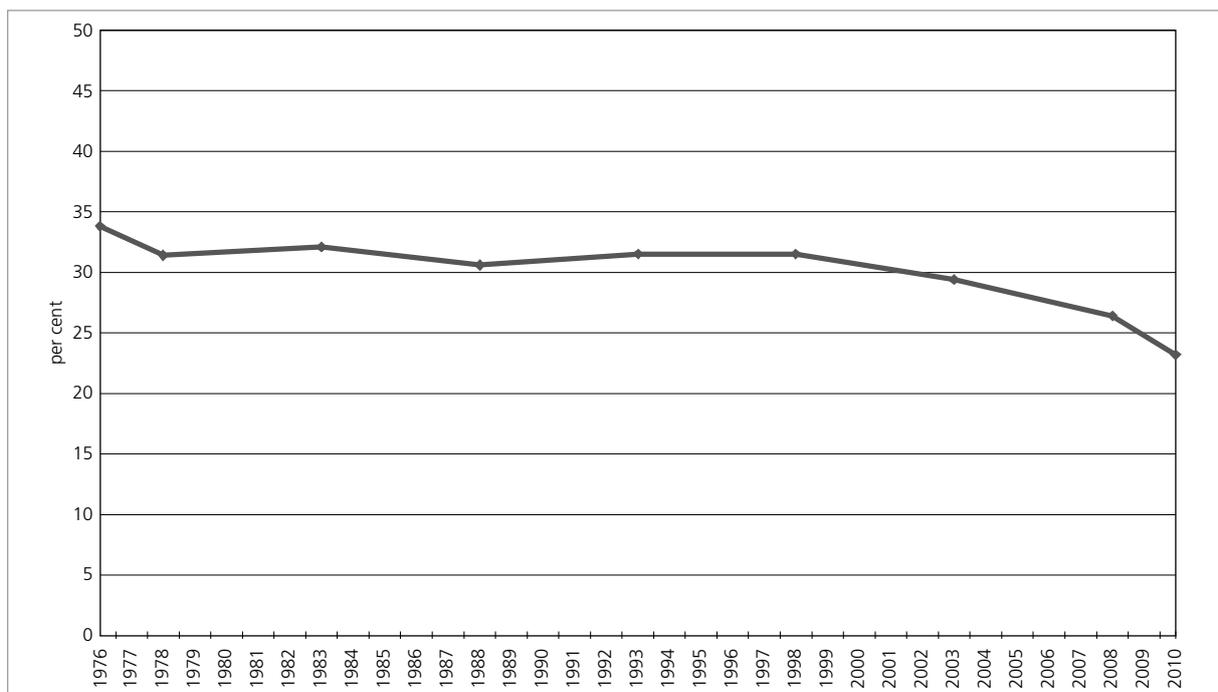
## 2. Government Power and Coalitions

A loss of votes need not necessarily result in a loss of government power: the need to form a coalition is probably even more important in determining who forms or takes

over the government than the election results alone. In most parliamentary democracies characterised by multi-party systems and proportional representation, it is only seldom that a single party receives the majority of seats and is therefore able to govern alone. Either a coalition of two or more parties is formed, or a minority government is supported or tolerated by a party that does not wish to enter government itself. Generally, the office of head of government in a coalition is taken by the strongest government party.

The latter does not mean that this party is necessarily the largest party in parliament. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), for example, led the German government from 1969 until 1972 and again from 1976 until 1982, although they were only the second-largest party in parliament with fewer seats than the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). Some parliamentary democracies assign the role of forming the government to the strongest party, although there is no guarantee it will be successful in forming a coalition. How often and how long a party has a role in the government is dependent primarily on a party's position in the party system rather than on its strength. The liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany, for example, has

Figure 1: Results of the social democratic parties in national parliamentary elections in Western European countries (EU15) since 1975



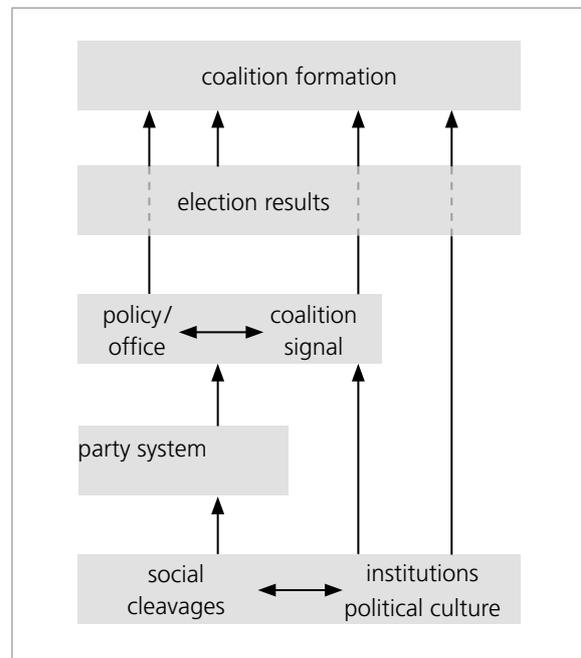
spent more time, overall, as a governing party than the CDU/CSU (42 versus 41 years), even though the latter's average share of the vote is four times greater. Over a long period of time, the FDP was able to benefit from its unique position as third party, which allowed it to govern in alternating coalitions with one of the two catch-all parties (CDU/CSU or SPD). Italy's Communist Party, on the other hand, which peaked at over 30 per cent of the vote, remained formally excluded from government during its entire existence.

Political science has identified two main factors determining the formation of coalitions. First, parties form alliances to acquire government power and offices (*office-seeking*); second, they form alliances in order to push through their political objectives (*policy-seeking*). These explanatory approaches complement each other. While it is necessary to attain government power in order to achieve policy objectives, governing cannot be reduced to an end in itself if the legitimacy of democratic competition between political parties and political power are to be upheld. A key hypothesis of coalition theory, for instance, is that the smaller the majority held by the parties and the more compatible their political positions are, the more likely it becomes that they will form an alliance. This has been repeatedly confirmed in empirical analyses. At the same time, analyses also show that the office- and policy-related factors explain only about half of the variance in coalition formation.

The office- and policy-relevant explanatory models of coalition building can be directly deduced from the structures of the party system, which represent the starting point of all considerations and deliberations pertaining to coalition strategies. These structures are shaped, in turn, by social and institutional factors, which in part also individually affect the formation of a coalition. The most important institutional factors include the form of government, the territorial organization of the state, the electoral system and the political culture (particularly with regard to patterns of conflict-resolution and consensus-building). Needless to say, these factors present numerous interrelations that must likewise be included in the analysis (Decker 2009). Furthermore, the office- and policy-related theories also meet their explanatory limits within the constraints of a given institutional context. For instance, they extensively ignore factors that are difficult to measure, such as the personnel or habitual compatibility/incompatibility of the partners, although these

could ultimately prove equally or even more decisive for the formation of a coalition (Decker 2008; Gschwend/Hooghe 2008).

Figure 2: Factors in coalition formation



### 3. Challenges of Coalition Strategies

Since the factors which underlie the formation of coalitions are shaped differently in the various national political systems, generalising about possible coalition strategies is difficult. The institutional and politico-cultural framework and conditions in the respective countries, for example, are largely fixed and cannot simply be applied to other countries. Stronger congruities can be found in the development of party systems. Although their structures have been shaped by national conditions, there are also overarching economic and cultural tendencies that have steered them in a similar direction.

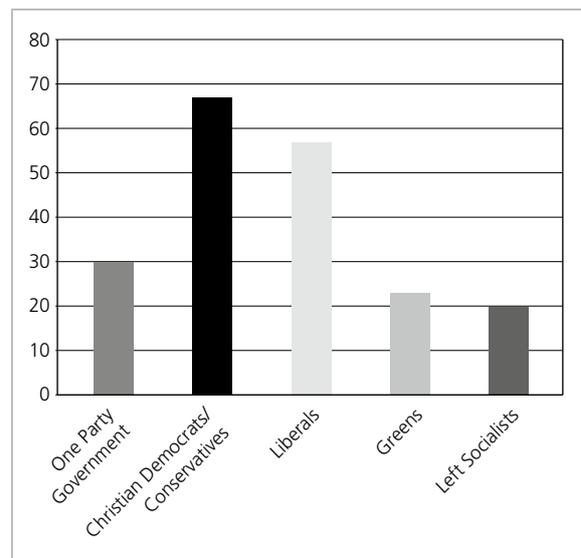
All historical phases of party system development have displayed such overarching tendencies, but their significance is growing within the context of accelerating globalisation. With regard to the situation of social democracy, common challenges can at least be identified, even if the strategic consequences drawn from them vary from country to country.

The significance of coalition formation is made evident by the two most significant overarching changes that Western European party systems have undergone since the 1970s. The first change stemmed from the emergence of Green parties in the late 1970s, which in particular afflicted social democrats and contributed to their electoral losses. The second change concerns the rise of the new right-wing populism in the late 1980s and 1990s, which contributed to a further decrease in social democrats' support, although it was more detrimental to the conservative and Christian Democratic parties. In both cases, the diminishing voter support did not result in the loss of a majority, since the traditional parties were (after a certain delay) able to include the new competitors in their coalition strategy. Nonetheless, the premises for forming a majority have become more difficult for both sides due to the pluralisation and fragmentation of party systems. Christian Democrats/conservatives and Social Democrats today find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to compete for voters (*vote seeking*) on multiple fronts. While the former are challenged by right-wing populist newcomers, the latter not only have to fence off the Greens, but also face growing left-wing competition that is benefiting from the shift of once-loyal social democratic voters (high volatility).

Based on the party groups in the European Parliament, six distinct party families can be identified in Europe today, represented in simple (and sometimes duplicate) variants in nearly all national party systems: social democrats, Christian Democrats/conservatives, liberals, greens, socialists and right-wing populists.<sup>1</sup> Arithmetically, this constellation implies that the weakened catch-all parties tend to require not only one, but two junior partners in order to form a (minimum-winning) coalition. According to the office-related explanation, if the catch-all parties' total proportion of votes declines, then one could expect the likelihood that both will form a »grand« coalition to increase. In fact, the Social Democrats seem to demonstrate no consistent pattern in their strategies for selecting coalition partners. An empirical evaluation of all the government coalitions they have entered in West European countries since 1990 shows all the above-mentioned party families, with the exception of right-wing

populists. This reconfirms that the choice of strategy is dependent on the respective national context.

Figure 3:  
Coalition partners of social democratic parties since 1990 (EU15; years of government)



On the basis of the *office-seeking* and *policy-seeking* objectives, three interrelated strategic problems can be identified with regard to the formation of coalitions.

The first problem relates to the character of competition. Is the competition for votes aimed primarily at winning over the voters of the other catch-all party or at garnering votes from opponents within one's own political camp? If the aim is to form a coalition within one's own political camp, it would be advisable to steer the competition towards the centre. The party moderates its policies in the direction of the political positions of the other catch-all party, while harshly attacking it in public debates. This approach is conducive to maximising the potential votes within the electorate and improves the chance of achieving the necessary majority. If, instead, an alliance with the other catch-all party is preferred, the party is well-advised to seek competition with the opponents in its own camp. Here, the primary aim is to gain relative strength, in comparison to the other partner. Both strategies are precarious since they mean that a party must clearly distinguish itself from precisely those parties it aspires to form a coalition with. What is of help in reaching a majority could thus turn out to be a hindrance to forming and operating a coalition.

1. In some states, there are additional regional parties. In the European Parliament, their representatives are part of the Green fraction, while the conservative parties in Great Britain, Poland (PIS) and in the Czech Republic (ODS) form their own separate fraction, apart from the Christian-democratic-conservative EVP.

Second, there is the problem of coalition statements. Should a party signal a preference for a certain partner or refuse another partner prior to elections? Or should general statements be wholly avoided in order to maintain as many options as possible until after the election. This poses an additional dilemma for the parties. On the one hand, they must evaluate how a signal (or the lack thereof) will influence voters: whether it will be rewarded or not. On the other hand, there is the question of the implications for their respective policy positions. Should the parties adjust their political programmes in advance according to their preferred coalition by moving towards the prospective partner? Or should they campaign – regardless of coalition preferences – on an independent programme that will only later be adjusted to the partner's positions in coalition negotiations (Debus 2007: 194 ff.)?

The third question is whether *office* or *policy* should be given precedence during coalition formation (*»junior partner problem«*). This is especially relevant with regard to the office of head of government, which only the strongest party in a coalition can claim. Is a functioning role as junior partner preferable to no government role at all, since this at least gives the party the opportunity to realise some of its own policy goals? The answer to these questions depends, on the one hand, on the electoral effects and consequences a party anticipates, if they were to accept a role as junior partner. On the other hand, it provides information about the willingness of the formerly invincible catch-all parties to accept the political consequences of their voters' diminishing support.

#### 4. Complexity of Coalition Strategies in the German Context

Coalition strategies are particularly complicated in the context of the German political system. First, coalition statements prior to elections are common practice and expected by the voters in Germany, as in Austria, Spain and France; this is not the case in other countries, such as the Netherlands, Sweden or Denmark (Decker and Best 2010: 167). In a survey from April 2008, 39 per cent of respondents declared that coalition statements played a very important role in their personal voting choices, while 35 per cent said they were important; 18 per cent attributed only a minor role to coalition statements, and a mere 7 per cent stated that they did not matter at all.

The media exert great pressure on the parties to make statements about their coalition intentions prior to elections, even with regard to the most improbable election results. The consequences for parties if they deviate from their earlier coalition signals after the elections were demonstrated clearly by the results of the state elections in Hesse in 2008 and 2009. After categorically rejecting such a governing option during the campaign, the head of the Social Democrats in Hesse tried – unsuccessfully – to install a red–green minority government supported by the Left Party. This triggered enormous public outrage, even though the formation of *any* majority coalition would have contradicted at least one party's signals (that is, every coalition option had been ruled out by at least one party in the campaign, including a Grand Coalition, which is exceptional since the latter is generally considered a valid *»last resort«* alliance).

Second, the complexity of coalition strategies is also due to the fact that forming a government in Germany had not been difficult for a long time. The combination of clear coalition statements and the reliable arithmetic of election results (and hence a relatively stable party system) led to the virtual *»automation«* of majority formation in the two-and-a-half party system of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in the bipolar four-party system of the 1980s. At first, the emergence of the predominantly eastern German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) after reunification did little to alter this pattern. But once the SPD splinter party *»Electoral Alternative for Social Justice«* (WASG) merged with the PDS to become the *»Left Party«*, the Socialists became electable in the western part of Germany as well. Hence, neither of the two political camps could form a majority coalition in 2005, leaving the last resort of a Grand Coalition the only feasible option. As of 2009, the once-familiar small, minimum-winning coalition has returned under a CDU/CSU–FDP government, but this does not imply that the party system's fragmentation has diminished. What made it possible for a *»small«* (one catch-all party and a smaller third party) majority coalition to win the election was rather the fact that the voters' discontent with the previous Grand Coalition was aimed predominantly at the Social Democrats.

In contrast to the federal level, the Left Party's electoral success and subsequent coalition strategies at western *Länder* level have hindered the formation of *»small«* SPD–Green (or *»Red–Green«*) or CSU/CSU–FDP majority coalitions in four (actually even five) cases. Such small



Table 1: Effects of Left Party success or failure on the possibility of »small« majority coalition formation

		SPD/Green	CDU/CSU-FDP
<b>Left Party success</b>	<i>Not hindering</i> »small« majority coalition	Bremen 2011 Hamburg 2011 (SPD-Alleinregierung)*	Lower Saxony 2008 Hesse 2009* Schleswig-Holstein 2009**
	<i>Disabling</i> »small« majority	Hamburg 2008 North Rhine-Westphalia 2011	Hesse 2008 Saarland 2009
<b>Left Party failure</b>	<i>Enabling</i> »small« majority coalition	Baden-Wuerttemberg 2011	
	<i>No impact on</i> »small« majority coalition	Rhineland-Palatinate 2011	Bavaria 2008

Note:

\* Early elections took place under very special circumstances: in Hesse the fiasco with the envisaged Red–Green minority government and in Hamburg the premature collapse of the CDU–Green cabinet (in the latter case, however, a SPD–Green coalition could probably have won a majority anyway).

\*\* In Schleswig-Holstein, a CDU–FDP coalition was able to take power in 2009, but only on the basis of an interpretation of electoral law that was later declared unconstitutional, forcing early elections in 2012.

coalitions remained feasible in four other cases, but at least one of them must be considered a special case (see Figure 4). In three cases, the Left Party failed to get over the 5 per cent hurdle; had the Socialists been successful, a »small« coalition could still have been formed in two of these, but probably not in the third.

Third, coalition strategies in Germany are further complicated by relations between federal and state politics. On the one hand, the Federal Government should be interested in forming coalitions of the same partisan pattern in the *Länder* since it requires the consent of the second chamber, the *Bundesrat*, to pass important legislation, and the *Bundesrat*, in turn, is composed of representatives of the *Länder* governments. On the other hand, the *Länder* serve as test labs for new coalition designs. These become legitimate on the federal level only once they have been tried and tested in the *Länder*. With the rapprochement of the Christian Democrats and the Greens, the SPD has lost most of its strategic advantage over the CDU/CSU of having more potential coalition partners. The first ever CDU–Green coalition at *Länder* level formed in the city-state of Hamburg in 2008, although it lasted only two and a half years. Since 2009, the first coalition of CDU, Greens and FDP (the so-called »Jamaica coalition«) has been governing in Saarland. Conversely, the SPD can claim governing experience with the FDP in Rhineland-Palatinate between 1991 and 2006, which is

much more recent than the social-liberal federal government of 1969 to 1982. But in order for the SPD to form a majority coalition with the FDP under current conditions, the Greens would in all likelihood have to be included. This so-called »traffic light coalition« (SPD as »red«, FDP as »yellow« and of course »green« for the Greens) was formed twice at *Land* level in the early 1990s (in Bremen and Brandenburg). In both cases, however, the coalitions collapsed shortly before the end of the legislative period. At the national level, any collaboration with the PDS/Left Party is even more difficult for the SPD, although the party can look back on two PDS-supported minority governments in Saxony-Anhalt (1994–2002), as well as majority coalitions in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (1998–2006), Berlin (since 2002) and Brandenburg (since 2009). For a possible coalition at the national level to become less »terrifying« to the electorate, there would need to be a further SPD/Left coalition in a western state first.<sup>2</sup> As of mid 2011, it seems less likely that such a coalition could form. In most of the *Länder* in which elections are

2. So far, the best opportunity to form such a coalition before the Bundestag elections in 2013 was missed in Saarland in 2009. Here, the Left party consists to a much greater extent of former SPD members than in other western states where members of former communist and other splinter parties play a major role. This more pragmatic nature of the Saarland Left Party stems from the popularity of the Left Party's former chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, who governed the state as SPD prime minister from 1985 to 1998. Ironically, Lafontaine was also the chief reason provided by the Greens for joining a CDU/FDP/Green coalition instead of a Red–Red–Green alliance.

due by 2013, Red–Green may be able to achieve a majority without the Left Party. Hence, the respective state parties would be well advised to focus on each other as potential coalition partners and explicitly rule out cooperation with the Left altogether. Otherwise, keeping this alternative coalition option open could unnecessarily scare away moderate voters.

Even if it should come to a Red–Red–Green coalition in a western state before 2013, it would not necessarily be of much use to the SPD. In 1994, the PDS-supported Red–Green minority government in Saxony-Anhalt became a considerable burden on the SPD *Bundestag* election campaign. Similarly, Red–Red–Green efforts in Thuringia and in Saarland shortly before the *Bundestag* election in 2009 provided the CDU/CSU and the FDP with additional ammunition for a »red menace« campaign against the SPD. In the eastern German states, where the Left ranks on a par with the CDU and the SPD, while the smaller parties (FDP and Greens) are comparatively weak, the SPD is caught in the dilemma of choosing between two unpopular coalition alternatives: an alliance with the Left Party or a Grand Coalition. The decision has the potential to unleash considerable internal party conflict (Eith 2010: 121), since it is also linked to the debate on the party's political course (in which the future development of the welfare state is the central issue).

## 5. Major-Party Complacency and the Junior Partner Problem

Deciding on coalitions is even harder when the SPD is not the strongest power in the desired constellation. This was the case for the Thuringia SPD in 2009. Before the state election, the Social Democrats had pushed massively for a policy change and the removal of the CDU prime minister, but had also excluded joining any coalition with a Left Party prime minister, although all polls – correctly – put the SPD well behind both rivals (Jou 2010). After the election, the unusual proposal by the Left Party to concede the office in favour of a jointly chosen Green or Social Democratic prime minister was ultimately turned down by the state head of the SPD. This not only triggered a – quite unnecessary – *mêlée* within the party, but it also affronted the reformers in the Left Party, who would have agreed to significant concessions towards the SPD. The situation repeated itself in Saxony-Anhalt in March 2011. Although the race in the polls with the Left Party was

tighter than in Thuringia, the Social Democrats ultimately came in third again and thus remained the junior partner in a coalition with the Christian Democrats.

The SPD's wounded major party pride seems even more problematic in relation to the Greens. In contrast to the Left, whose only coalition option is with the SPD or with the SPD and the Greens, the Greens have alternative coalition possibilities with the centre-right parties. Hence, if the Social Democrats continue to make their willingness to form a coalition dependent on getting the premiership, they could wind up driving their preferred coalition partner straight into the arms of the Christian Democrats. At least the Social Democrats in Baden-Württemberg have learned their lesson. In the run-up to the state elections in March 2011, they stated publicly that, given a red-green majority, a coalition should be formed and the premiership bestowed on the stronger of the two parties, whichever that might be. Ultimately outperformed by the Greens by one percentage point, they seem to be honouring that agreement, providing the Greens with their first prime minister. The Berlin state section has had more difficulty accepting the rise of the Greens who have sent one of their national parliamentary chairs to challenge the incumbent SPD mayor. An anti-Greens campaign would probably not harm the SPD in the city-state, given the mayor's personal popularity and the viable alternative of continuing the current coalition with the Left, provided the parties gain a majority. With regard to the national level, however, a dissociation from the Greens on the part of the Social Democrats could lead to frustration, shifting the Greens further towards the centre-right. The Greens, once politically and organizationally tied to the SPD, would then take on a pivotal role in the party system, similar to the role played by the FDP until the early 1980s.

The junior-partner problem can also prove to be a decisive stumbling block in the process of initiating a Grand Coalition. Indeed, from both the parties' and voters' perspectives, the position of prime minister has – and is attributed – exceptional importance for policy-making, as well as electoral competition. Consequently, would-be coalition partners seem far from willing to relinquish the office to one another. This is especially the case when the parties' percentages of the vote differ by only a narrow margin, as was the case in 2005 at the national level and in 2010 in North Rhine-Westphalia. After surprisingly narrowing the margin and finishing close behind the

Christian Democrats in both instances, the Social Democrats only reluctantly accepted the CDU/CSU's claim to the office in the first, while in the latter, they decided, after much coaxing by the Green Party, to embark on the daring experiment of a Red–Green minority government, in which they could nominate the Prime Minister on their own. The state government's political performance after less than one year in office, however, raises doubt about whether the party's decision was prudent.<sup>3</sup>

## 6. Prospects for Coalitions in 2013

The most important event in the development of the German party system since 2009 has been the break-up of the centre-right camp. The extent of the alienation between these supposedly preferred partners, the Christian Democrats and the liberal FDP, is a surprise even to sympathetic observers. Its consequence was an unparalleled drop in support for the FDP in the polls, which could hinder the centre-right parties' ability to form a majority for an extended period (Raschke 2011).

Given the mutual alienation between the Christian Democrats and the FDP, the Red–Green alliance remains the most ideologically homogeneous coalition in the German party system. This may reinforce both parties' hopes of forming their own majority (thus excluding the FDP or the Left), which in turn may have ambivalent consequences for the formation of coalitions: on the one hand, the two partners of this core alliance will bond more closely; on the other, it relieves them of the need to broaden the majority basis of their preferred alliance by including the FDP or the Left in the coalition game. And neglecting to do precisely that would most certainly come back to haunt them at election time, given the ongoing developments in the party system, which make an independent Red–Green majority appear fairly unlikely. The main reason for this lies in the Left Party's position, which has remained stable despite multiple internal party quarrels and which, since 2005, has perpetuated the asymmetrical two-camp structure (two parties in the centre-right camp versus three parties in the left-wing

camp). If the SPD and Greens fail to reach a majority even under exceptionally favourable conditions, as in North-Rhine Westphalia, it seems all the more out of reach under less favourable conditions, such as in other states or at the national level.

The problem of coalition building in a five-party system is further complicated by the positions within the two camps that generally ensure the CDU/CSU a stable lead over the SPD. Hitherto, the weaknesses of the CDU/CSU–FDP coalition have almost exclusively taken their toll on the FDP, while the Greens seem to be benefiting from their opposition status to a much stronger degree than the SPD, the latter only slightly edging away from their record low in the 2009 Bundestag elections. Even if the political agenda has helped bolster support for the Greens, it is still difficult to imagine that this overall constellation will change. The need to remain open to an additional partner in a cross-camp, three-party coalition is thus stronger for the SPD than for the CDU, which can always revert to the Grand Coalition if necessary. As the most likely stronger partner, the Christian Democrats could claim the chancellorship in such an alliance.

At present, there does not seem to be much movement towards the two potential partners, the Left Party and the FDP. With regard to the Left, their party programme in-the-making seems headed more towards radicalisation and separation (from the Social Democrats) than moderation and compromise. Moreover, the collision between the opposition parties during the presidential election in 2010 can hardly be interpreted as a positive sign of future cooperation between the SPD and the Left. In one survey, only 37 per cent of the respondents agreed that SPD, Greens and the Left Party go well together, and even that figure is achieved only by an extremely disproportionate amount of agreement with the statement among Left Party supporters (73 per cent). Given how insecure the future relationship to the Left Party is at the national level, it would appear even less desirable for the SPD to experiment with any cooperation with the Left Party in a western German federal state before the 2013 national elections. Should the Left Party fail to moderate its political position and thus continue to marginalise itself, the formation of a Red–Red–Green state coalition in the west would needlessly provide the CDU and the FDP with substance for a polarised, scare-tactic campaign.

3. At the end of 2010, a supplementary budget was presented, which placated Left Party support by largely refraining from budget cuts, but also overstepped the constitutionally set debt limit. With the budget ruled unconstitutional by the state constitutional court, it remains uncertain whether there will be early elections and how these would affect the SPD and Greens: in any case, their policies have not demonstrated great fiscal responsibility.

The question of how the relationship to the FDP will develop is also entirely open. Given their critical drop in the polls and the latest state parliament elections, the Liberals cannot rely on being able to form a centre-right coalition, nor can they count on the Greens being available for a coalition in order to achieve a majority, if necessary. It would more likely be the latter – with clearly better election results than the FDP – calling for the Liberals to cross the partisan-camp divide for a possible coalition. The change of leadership two years ahead of the next national elections – after the FDP's series of heavy defeats in the 2011 state elections – has certainly increased the chances of a »traffic light« alliance. However, the personnel reshuffle has up to now been very limited. More changes should follow and also lead to a substantial modification of policy positions. The Liberals would be well-advised to steer away from their rather

one-sided free-market orientation, placing stronger emphasis on socio-political topics and showing more flexibility towards possible coalitions with the SPD and the Greens. The SPD could, in turn, focus on areas of policy agreement (such as civil rights) and by nominating a chancellor candidate with »moderate« appeal.

## 7. Conclusion

Since, at present, neither the Socialists' ability nor the Liberals' willingness to form a coalition with the SPD or the Greens seem reliable, the SPD needs primarily to bind the Greens as closely as possible. Pursuing a strategy of competitive partnership to foster the Red–Green core alliance could prove the most effective way to keep the Greens from drifting to the centre-right camp. Besides attitudi-

Table 2: Approval ratings for the various coalition forms, referring to the supporters of the relevant parties

	Centre-right coalition (CDU/CSU–FDP)	Red–Green (SPD/Green)	Black–Green (CDU/CSU–Green)	Grand Coalition (CDU/CSU–SPD)	»Jamaica« coalition (CDU/CSU–FDP–Green)	»Traffic-light« coalition (SPD–FDP–Green)	Red–Red–Green (SPD–Left Party–Green)
July I 2005	47/51/ <b>92</b>	23/36/ <b>64</b>	—	47/71/ <b>66</b>	—	—	—
Aug. I 2005	39/50/ <b>78</b>	27/37/ <b>73</b>	—	50/70/ <b>71</b>	—	—	14/46/ <b>30</b>
Sep. III 2005	45/45/ <b>100</b>	—	—	45/72/ <b>63</b>	36/53/ <b>68</b>	30/51/ <b>59</b>	15/51/ <b>29</b>
Okt. I 2005	—	—	—	63/73/ <b>86</b>	28/53/ <b>53</b>	21/48/ <b>44</b>	14/50/ <b>28</b>
July 2006	—	—	—	—	28/56/ <b>50</b>	27/50/ <b>54</b>	16/46/ <b>35</b>
Nov. I 2006	—	—	—	36/66/ <b>55</b>	—	—	—
Feb. I 2008	36/48/ <b>75</b>	35/37/ <b>95</b>	—	33/71/ <b>46</b>	27/55/ <b>49</b>	26/44/ <b>59</b>	18/47/ <b>38</b>
Feb. II 2008	—	—	30/47/ <b>64</b>	—	—	—	19/48/ <b>40</b>
Aug. 2008	—	—	—	—	—	—	17/46/ <b>37</b>
Jan. I 2009	40/51/ <b>78</b>	32/34/ <b>94</b>	25/48/ <b>52</b>	37/66/ <b>56</b>	—	—	15/44/ <b>34</b>
March I 2009	44/52/ <b>85</b>	—	—	33/61/ <b>54</b>	—	26/49/ <b>53</b>	14/44/ <b>32</b>
Sep. I 2009	43/52/ <b>83</b>	—	—	—	29/63/ <b>46</b>	—	20/44/ <b>45</b>
Sep. III 2009	39/49/ <b>80</b>	—	—	38/51/ <b>75</b>	—	—	—
Okt. I 2009	46/49/ <b>94</b>	—	—	—	—	—	—
March I 2010	27/46/ <b>59</b>	38/39/ <b>97</b>	30/50/ <b>60</b>	41/61/ <b>67</b>	—	14/49/ <b>29</b>	20/49/ <b>41</b>
April I 2011	20/39/ <b>51</b>	48/47/ <b>102</b>	34/53/ <b>64</b>	46/62/ <b>74</b>	—	—	—

Note: The first number indicates the percentage of acceptance for a coalition option (e.g. Red–Green) in the population as a whole and the second number, drawn from the »Sunday question« survey, shows the aggregate percentage of support for the individual parties represented in that coalition (e.g. SPD and Green). The third number (in boldface) results from a division of the first by the second number and conveys the acceptance of each coalition option related to the supporters of the parties represented in the respective coalition (in %), e.g. the acceptance for a Red–Green coalition / (supporters SPD + supporters Green). Source: The authors' calculations draw from the data of the German Opinion Survey Institute »Forschungsgruppe Wahlen«.

nal incompatibilities, it was above all disagreements in energy and education policy that impeded a CDU–Green alliance. With the turnaround in nuclear energy policy initiated by the Christian Democrats after the Fukushima catastrophe, one of these hindrances – and the most important one at the national level – could soon cease to exist. A Black–Green coalition in 2013 is thus by no means a »pipe dream«, as Chancellor Angela Merkel recently described it.

The SPD needs to realise that, without the Greens, the only remaining viable alternative is a Grand Coalition as junior partner. If the Social Democrats handle their preferred partner with care during the election campaign, then it should be enough for the SPD to refer to the Red–Green majority support predicted by the polls as a coalition signal. Questions concerning possible alternatives if the election fails to give the SPD–Greens a majority could be broadly circumvented. If, during the »hot phase« of the election campaign, a Red–Green majority seems rather unlikely, the SPD would have to diversify its coalition statements, thus becoming dependent upon the FDP and/or the Left Party. However, the SPD was not successful with such a course during the *Bundestag* elections in 2009, when the FDP's refusal to enter a traffic-light coalition and the SPD's own refusal to work with the Left eliminated all prospects of heading the government (Decker/Best 2010: 177). Even if the FDP or the Left Party signalled a willingness to form a coalition, the SPD would fare best with a realistic Red–Green option, since their voters seem to support this alliance unanimously (in fact, the support of the alliance even outperforms the two parties' support: see Table 2). In contrast, of all imaginable coalitions, the »traffic light« and the Red–Red–Green alliance are their respective supporters' least preferred variants. The Left–SPD–Green coalition option owes its highest recorded support level of 45 per cent to their voters' reorientation shortly before the *Bundestag* elections in 2009 in anticipation of the predictable change in coalition politics. Six months later, this share had fallen to 41 per cent. The percentage of SPD, Greens and FDP supporters open to the idea of a »traffic-light« coalition has declined from nearly 60 per cent (during the Grand Coalition, 2005–2009) to half that. A policy reorientation by the Liberals, however, could pull this share up again just as quickly.

Ultimately, all possible coalition strategies are dependent on conditions that the SPD itself can only partially influ-

ence. Whether the FDP and the Left Party open up to possible cooperation lies – in other words – in their own hands and not in the hands of the Social Democrats. And it is equally uncertain whether the Greens could resist an invitation to enter into coalition with the Christian Democrats, particularly if the alternative meant allowing a Grand Coalition to form, thus ceding the possibility to govern to the SPD. Coalition strategies thus not only vary depending on the particular national political context; they also have to respond to rapidly changing circumstances within that context. However, it would be quite erroneous to conclude from this that a strategic concept is superfluous or necessarily doomed to failure. Rather, the coalition diversity in the new five-party system requires the opposite: a precise coordination of programmes, personnel choices and coalition strategies that ensures reliability for the voters. In the past few years, the SPD has not been very successful in this. This will have to change if the party hopes to return to winning elections and shaping government policy in the future.



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