

The German Political System II

Elections, parties, interest groups and the media

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Outline

- 1 Elections to the Bundestag
 - Electoral system
 - Elections
- 2 The German Party system
 - Parties in Germany
 - Party positions compared
 - Changes in the party system
- 3 Democratically non legitimized actors
 - Interest groups
 - The mass media



General provisions

The Basic Law only states that members of the Bundestag shall be elected in

- general,
- direct,
- free,
- equal and
- secret elections.

The exact type of electoral system is not specified by the Basic Law.



- Mixed Member Proportional electoral system (MMP) - in Germany called **Personalized Proportional Representation** → a subtype of Proportional Representation systems
- Every voter has two votes
 - First vote: determines with simple majority the candidate in a single member electoral district who directly enters the Bundestag (299 electoral districts)
 - Second vote: determines on the basis of party lists within every Bundesland the allocation of seats in the Bundestag
- If a party received more direct seats than would be due according to the second vote, it keeps these so called **overhang mandates**
- Legal threshold 5% at the national level or at least three direct candidates → prevents a high fragmentation
- Paradoxical results because of the possibility of **negative vote weights**
 - Votes for a party at the „wrong place“ might result in the loss of total seats for that party
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Effects of the electoral system

- 5%-threshold: fear of losing a vote → difficult for small parties to become relevant actors
- Strategic voting/vote splitting:
 - For not wasting their vote supporters of small parties frequently give their first vote to one of the two major parties, while only voting their real preference at the second vote (e.g. second vote for Greens, first vote for SPD) → indicates the preferred coalition.
 - Tactically borrowing of second votes (to help the preferred coalition partner overcome the 5%-threshold).
- The German electoral system as an export hit: New Zealand (since 1996), Scotland, Wales, electoral reform initiatives in Canada



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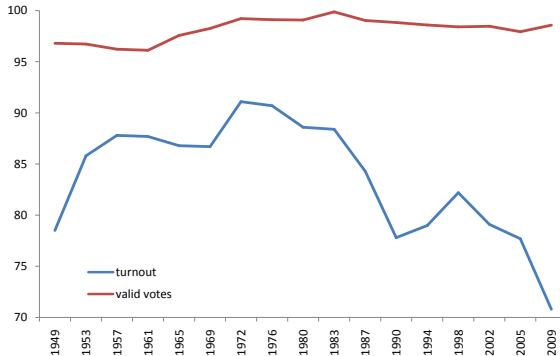


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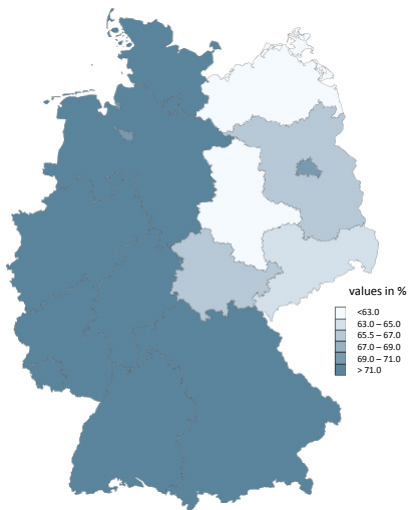


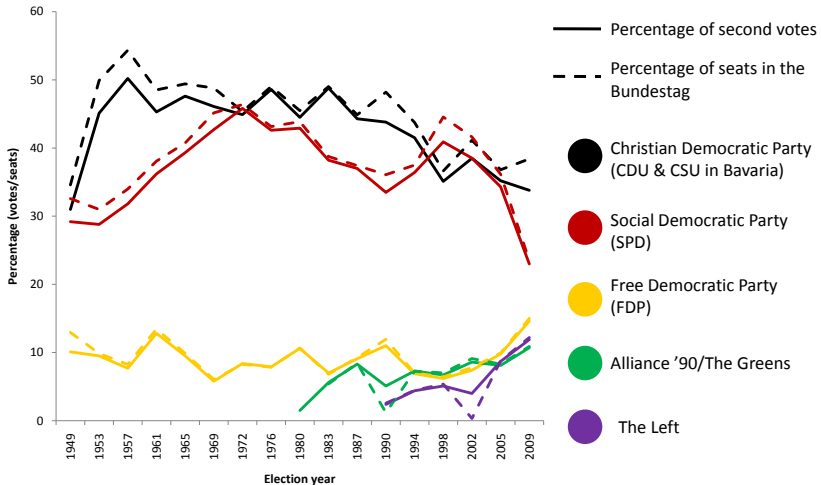
Voter turnout



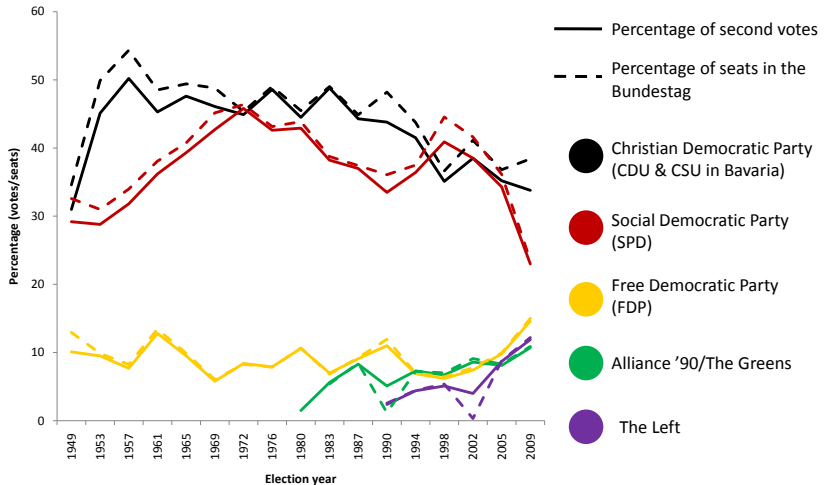
The declining turnout can be seen as an indicator of disenchantment with politics and/or with parties.

Voter turnout by Bundesland (2009 Bundestag election)



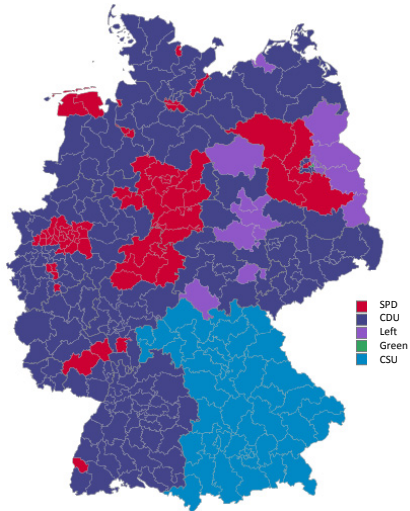


→ Disproportionalities resulting from the electoral system mostly favor the two large parties.

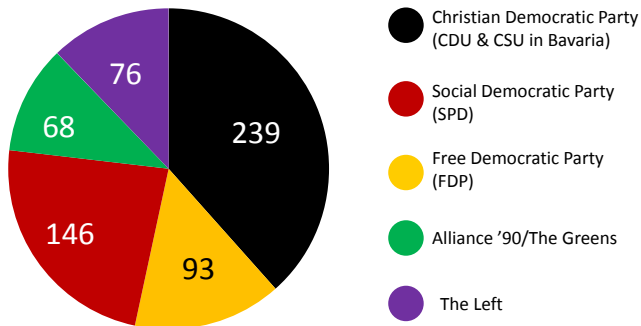


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Distribution of first votes by electoral district (2009 Bundestag election)

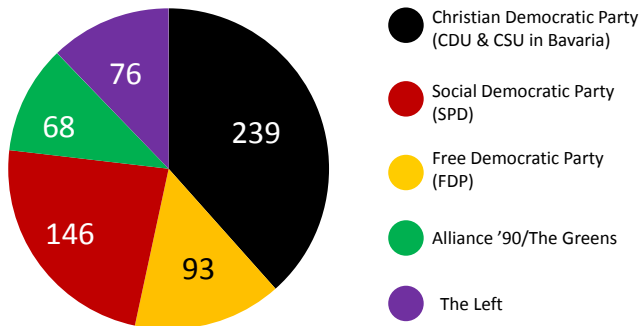


Seat distribution of the 17th Bundestag (2009 election)



→ 24 overhang mandates

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General provisions

- Except the churches parties are the only groups explicitly mentioned in the Basic Law (Art. 21):
 - Political parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people.
 - They may be freely established.
 - Their internal organisation must conform to democratic principles.
 - They must publicly account for their assets and for the sources and use of their funds.
 - Parties that, by reason of their aims or the behaviour of their adherents, seek to undermine or abolish the free democratic basic order or to endanger the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany shall be unconstitutional. The Federal Constitutional Court shall rule on the question of unconstitutionality.



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Role of parties in the German political system

- According to the German Party Law parties fulfil the following functions:
 - Recruitment of political personal
 - Development of policies (written down in programs)
 - Taking influence on the public opinion and the forming of the political will of the citizens
 - Exerting influence on politics within parliament and government → tension between party discipline and the free mandate of the member of the Bundestag
- Public financing of political parties
- Party membership is often a key for a career in the public sector or the public broadcasting.



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Christian Democratic Union of Germany



- Proclaiming a social order formed by christian norms and values
- Conservative views in regulatory and security politics
- Social market economy (rests upon the catholic social teaching: solidarity, subsidiarity...)
- Development from a mere „chancellor voting association“ under Adenauer to a catch all party



Christian Social Union of Bavaria

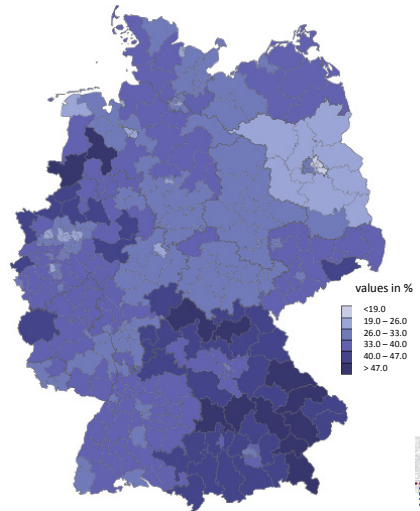


- Sister party of the CDU, only campaigning in Bavaria, where the CDU is not active
- In general similar policy objectives like the CDU, but in many instances a bit more radical
- CSU rules at the state level in Bavaria since 1946 - with an absolute majority between 1966-2009 → unique stability for Germany



Results for CDU & CSU by electoral district (Bundestag election 2009)

- Stronger in the countryside
- Best results in Bavaria





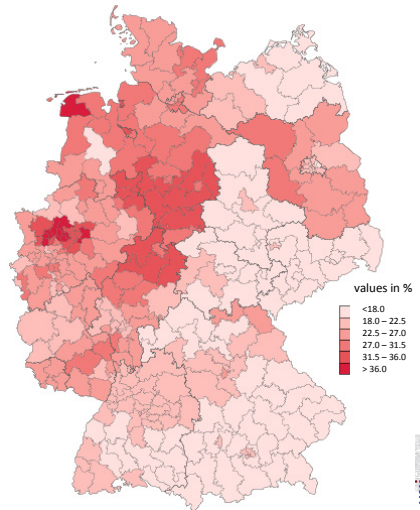
Social Democratic Party of Germany

- Oldest political party in Germany
- No more revolutionary as it was in the beginning but more moderate, center-left
- Social justice as key concept
- Strong connections to labor unions and a strong backing in the public sector (e.g. teachers)
- But under chancellor Schröder the SPD also initiated major reforms in the social system and labor market (Agenda 2010)



Results for SPD by electoral district (Bundestag election 2009)

- Stronger in cities and in the north and west of Germany
- Especially strong in the Ruhr area





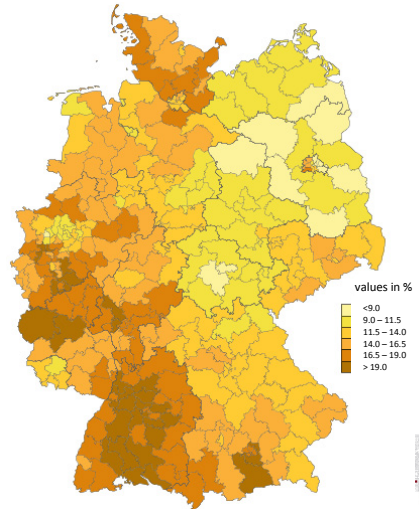
Free Democratic Party

- Stands for Freedom, a liberal society
- In the last years often reduced to a one topic party:
reduce taxes
- For a long time (1960s-90s) the FDP had the possibility
in most cases to decide with whome to form a coalition
→ The Greens and the Left undermine this position.



Results for FDP by electoral district (Bundestag election 2009)

- Traditionally strong in Baden-Württemberg → many small entrepreneurs
- At the 2009 election also very strong in the rest of Germany, even in East Germany, where the FDP had been marginalized before



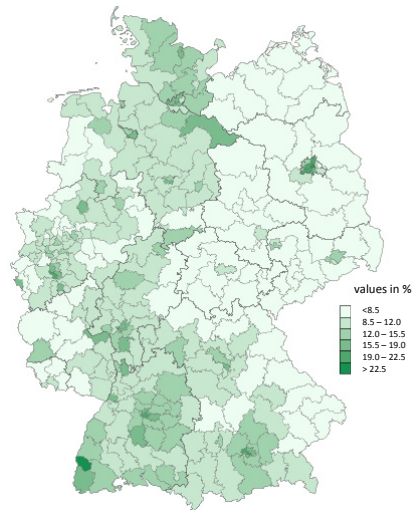


Alliance '90/The Greens

- Product of the value change from materialism to post-materialism (Inglehart)
- Origins in several social movements from the 1970s and 80s: ecology, anti-nuclear, peace
- Fundamental positions (pacifism...) no longer leading in the party → Kosovo mission enacted by the Red-Green government (1999)
- Weak in the East German Länder
- Different coalitions with participation of Greens at the Länder level (SPD-Green, SPD-Left-Green, CDU-Green, CDU-FDP-Green („Jamaica-Coalition“)) show that the Green party has become a more centrally located party and thus a potential coalition partner not only for the Social Democrats.

Results for the Greens by electoral district (Bundestag election 2009)

- Much stronger in West Germany than in the East
- In a number of cities (e.g. Freiburg) almost at the same strength as the major parties CDU and SPD



The Left

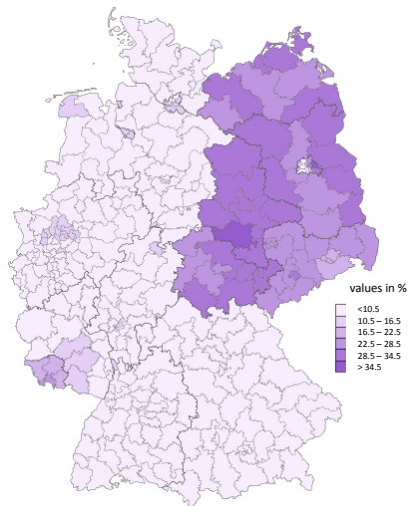
DIE LINKE.

- Most leftist party among the five large German parties
- Established as a merger of the PDS (successor party of Socialist Unity Party, the ruling party in the German Democratic Republic) and the West German WASG → But still the Left remains a party primarily positioned in the East German Länder.



Results for the Left by electoral district (Bundestag election 2009)

- In East Germany sometime even the strongest party
- In West Germany only relevant in the Saar region (Oskar Lafontaine) and in the Ruhr area (classic worker region)



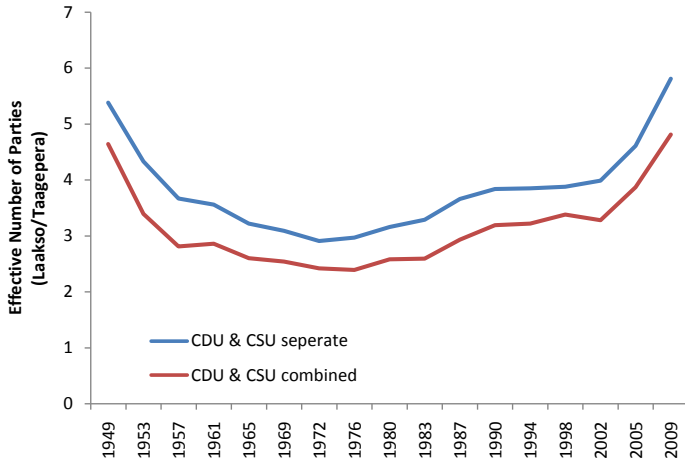
Phases of party system development

- Frozen party system as proposed by Lipset/Rokkan's cleavage theory not appropriate
- Phase of new formation (1945-49) → licensing by the Allied
- 1950s consolidation and concentration of the party system
- Stabil two-and-a-half party system (1960s-1983)
- Pluralized system of two party groups (1983-) with a specific regional component in Eastern Germany since 1990
- since 2005 fluid five party system

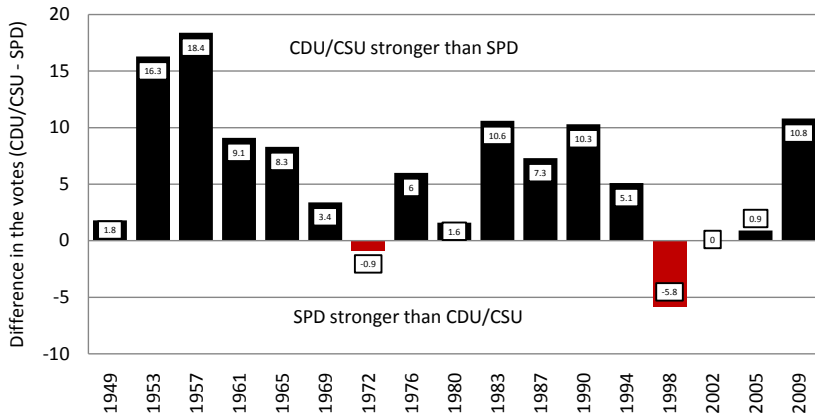
Criteria to analyze party system change

- Fragmentation
- Asymmetry between the largest parties
- Volatility

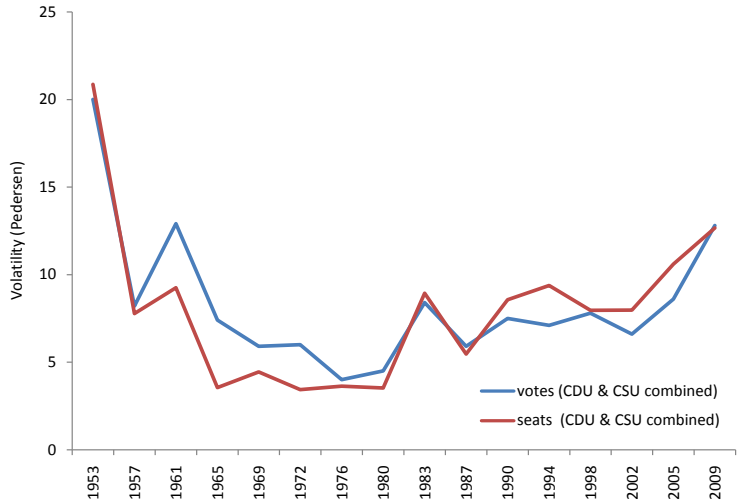
Fragmentation of the party system



Asymmetry between the largest parties



Volatility



The Pirate-Party - a new relevant political actor?

- First Pirate-Party founded 2006 in Sweden (7.1% at the elections to the European parliament 2009)
- Issues: Internet, data-security, reform of copyright law and direct democracy
- In Germany 2% at the last Bundestag elections (2009) and with 8.9% at the elections for the Berlin chamber of deputies (September 2011) the Pirate-Party for the first time made it into a Länder parliament (while the FDP dropped out with just 2%)
- Last polls saw the Pirate-Party Germany-wide at 7%

Most analysts nevertheless see the recent success of the Pirate-Party only as a protest to the established party system.

Plurality of interests as a basis for democracy

Common welfare as an outcome of disputes between groups → Interest groups necessary:

- Free articulation of interests strengthens democratic legitimacy of political decisions
- Multitude of societal interests cannot be adequately represented by the few parties
- Aggregation of interests in larger interest groups strengthens assertiveness but it also reduces complexity and makes dealing with these issues easier for politics.

Interests can be distinguished according to the possibility to **organize** them and to the ability of interest groups to make a substantive **conflict** out of them (by means of strikes, threat to withdraw votes)

Neo-corporatist arrangements between the state and interest groups are existent but mostly sectoral and not as strong as in Austria or Scandinavian countries. (e.g. Schröder tried 1999 to start a „Bündnis für Arbeit“ - Alliance for Jobs between the state, the employers and the trade unions → finally failed in 2003)



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Interests can be distinguished according to the possibility to **organize** them and to the ability of interest groups to make a substantive **conflict** out of them (by means of strikes, threat to withdraw votes)

Neo-corporatist arrangements between the state and interest groups are existent but mostly sectoral and not as strong as in Austria or Scandinavian countries. (e.g. Schröder tried 1999 to start a „Bündnis für Arbeit“ - Alliance for Jobs between the state, the employers and the trade unions → finally failed in 2003)



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The „big four“ German interest groups (Ellwein):

- Entrepreneurs and employers (Federation of German Industry - BDI; Confederation of German Employers - BDA)
- Labor unions (United Services Union - ver.di; Confederation of German Trade Unions - DGB)
→ continuously losing members, but still powerful (autonomy in collective bargaining)
- Churches
→ significant loss of members and thus bargaining power
- Farmer's association
→ with the decline in the number of farmers, their association lost power
→ many laws regarding agriculture are now made in Brussels



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Rise of new interest groups:

- Interest groups representing the socially disadvantaged
- Interest groups in the health sector
- Ecological interest groups

Citizens' initiatives become more important:

- often only one goal
- no classical membership structure but a fluid and informal supporter system
- ability to mobilize people (e.g. the protests against Stuttgart 21 - the new train station in Stuttgart - which showed political consequences on the state and on the federal level)

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- Agenda setting: the mass media determine the political agenda according to the weight that they place on certain issues.
- Framing of issues: the media provide angles for the interpretation of political questions.
- Priming: the media determine what issues are important and which are not.

Mediatization of politics

- „Americanization“ of politics especially during election campaigns (election debate on tv among the chancellor candidates → personalization and emotionalization of politics)
- Horse race journalism (concentration on the competition character of politics, while destroying coverage of the issues)

The German media landscape

Independent newspapers

- nation wide: BILD (yellowpress), Süddeutsche Zeitung (more SPD-oriented), Frankfurter Allgemeine (more conservative)...
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Broadcasting

- Public broadcasters (nation wide: ARD, ZDF + regional stations): in general quite high journalistic quality; financed by a radio and TV licence fee
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