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A New Era of Electoral Instability

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Turbulent Elections

Over the past half century, the behavior of German voters has changed profoundly. After a long period of stability, elections have dramatically altered their character—at first rather gradually, but during the past decade at an accelerated speed. When commenting on the outcomes of the 2013 and even more so the 2017 federal elections, few observers were at a loss for dramatic metaphors. A "new openness" of the electorate (Münch and Oberreuter 2015) appeared to have brought about a "caesura" of "historic" dimensions (Jesse 2018; Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019), where "nothing remained as it had been" (Niedermayer 2015) and "the stability of parties and the party system," if not "normal politics" altogether had "come to an end" (Grabow and Neu 2018; Schultze 2018). Clearly, voters' decision-making has become much more volatile, rendering election outcomes less predictable. The long-term process of party system fragmentation that had already been going on for a while intensified sharply. A particularly conspicuous outcome of this period of turbulent electoral politics was the termination of Germany's exceptionality as one of the few European countries without a strong right-wing populist party.

Long-term processes of social and cultural modernization of the kind also experienced by other advanced industrial democracies, but also German unification as a unique historical occurrence has given rise to these trends. In addition, at each of the most recent elections, parties and voters were confronted with extraordinary challenges. Whereas the 2009 federal election took place just one year after the world's most serious financial and economic crisis since the 1930s, the 2013 election was overshadowed by the European sovereign debt crisis. The 2017 federal election, finally, took place in the aftermath of the European refugee crisis that had peaked in 2015. The fast-paced electoral change brought about by these developments has made life much more complicated for voters and parties alike. Electors' decision calculi have become more heterogeneous and complex

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(Weßels et al. 2014). In important ways, the electoral politics of the German Federal Republic appears to return to where it started 70 years ago.

How did the turbulences that increasingly characterize German electoral politics come about? How did they feed back into voters' decision-making? How relevant were situational factors that pertained to the specifics of particular elections, such as, most notably, the sequence of three crises, for electoral beliefs, attitudes, and choices? These are the questions addressed by this book. It takes an in-depth look at electoral behavior in Germany during the period of its hitherto most dramatically increased fluidity, at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. It aims for a better understanding of the trajectory of electoral politics and its consequences for the prospects of democratic governance in this country by discerning the extent and nature of change and stability across the three federal elections that together mark a phase of exceptional electoral volatility. To provide the necessary background and put these elections in perspective, the following section places them in the wider context of the long-term development of German electoral behavior and the party system. It identifies three distinctive phases: 1949 to 1976, 1980 to 2005, and 2009 to 2017. The topoi of realignment and dealignment are then evoked as key concepts for interpreting the trends that have become increasingly visible since the second of these phases. The final section outlines how the book examines changing voters in the context of changing parties, campaigns, and media.

Voting Behavior and the Party System: From Fragmentation to Concentration—and Back

1949 to 1976: The "German Electoral Miracle"

The first federal election took place in 1949, immediately after the creation of the German Federal Republic. It was the founding election of the second German democracy, but at the same time, it displayed strong continuities with the first democracy that in 1933 had been destroyed and replaced by one of the most brutal dictatorships in human history (Falter 1981). Organizationally, ideologically, and with regard to their social bases, several of the parties that competed at this election had close ties to parties of the demised Weimar Republic. The Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU[1]) and the Social Democrats (SPD) scored highest, with 31 and 29 percent of the votes respectively (Figure 1.1). The SPD had originally been founded in 1875 to represent the interests of the working class in the emerging industrial society of the German empire and was re-established immediately after liberation from

[1] The CSU is a regional party that exists only in Bavaria, whereas its sister party, CDU, maintains no party organization and does not run at elections in this state. At federal elections both parties have always campaigned together and in the national parliament they regularly form a joint faction.

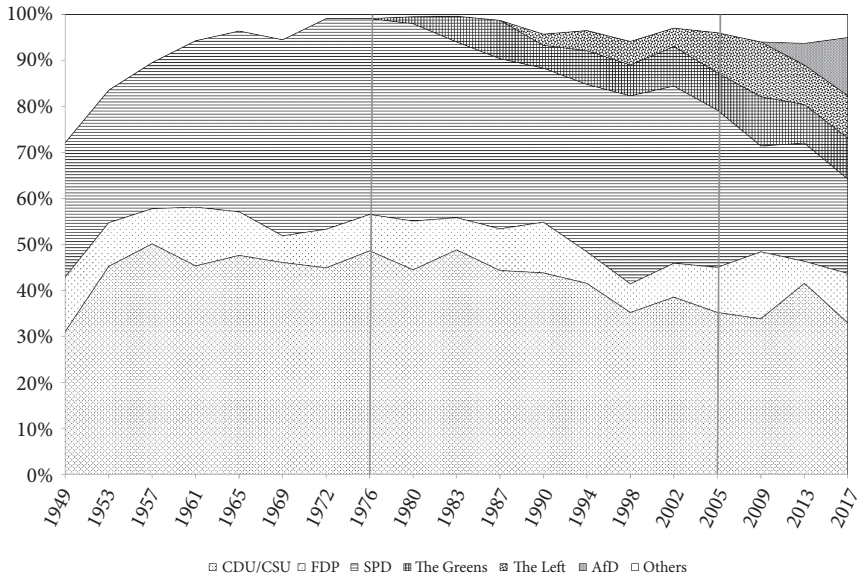

Fig. 1.1 Results of German federal elections, 1949–2017 (second votes)
Source: www.bundeswahlleiter.de.

the Nazi regime in 1945. Whereas its main competitor thus looked back at a long tradition, the CDU/CSU was a new creation. Although partly succeeding the pre-1933 Catholic *Zentrum* (Center) party, the founders of the CDU/CSU opted for an inter-denominational approach, seeking to represent Christian Democratic values more broadly. As center-left and center-right parties located on opposite sides of the socio-economic and religious cleavages (Pappi 1973), the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats until today have defined the gravitation core of German politics (Dalton 1993: 278–326).

While these two parties came out strongest, the first Parliament of the German Federal Republic was quite crowded. All in all, ten parties gained mandates. The party system's electoral fragmentation was very high on all accounts (Figure 1.2). The effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) amounted to 4.8, the party system's fractionalization (Rae 1968) amounted to 0.79. This raised worries among contemporaries that the second German democracy might fall victim to the same spiral of hostile segmentation and polarization as its predecessor, which barely survived fourteen years after its inception in 1919. Pleasantly disappointing these expectations, the party system instead underwent a rapid concentration process that contemporary observers lauded as a "German electoral miracle" (Baer and Faul 1953). The CDU/CSU formed the first federal government together with the liberal Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) as well as several smaller parties of various conservative hues. During the following electoral cycle, it was able

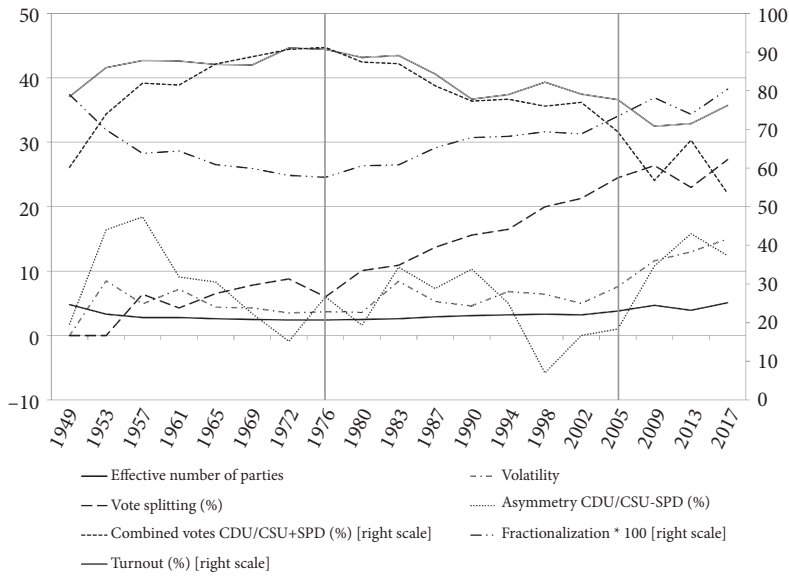

Fig. 1.2 Structural parameters of the German electoral party system, 1949–2017

Sources: www.bundeswahlleiter.de; Blumenstiel (2011, 2014a); Dietz and Roßteutscher (2019); own calculations.

to absorb the latter into its own organization and electorate. As a consequence, already at the 1953 federal election, it achieved a structural majority position vis-à-vis the Social Democrats that allowed it to remain comfortably in power for almost two decades (Niedermayer 2013).

For the SPD, leadership in government came within reach only after a slow and tedious uphill struggle that began with a major redefinition of its programmatic identity. Acknowledging the facts that had been created under Christian Democratic rule, in the late 1950s the Social Democratic Party abandoned the rhetoric and political outlook of class struggle and made its peace with the market economy as well as the country's rearmament and political and military integration in the West. This allowed it to broaden its electoral appeal beyond its traditional working-class support base, increasingly attracting voters from the new middle class of white-collar employees and civil servants (Heimann 1986). After an interim period of three years during which the SPD participated in the federal government as a junior partner in a Grand Coalition with the CDU/CSU, it eventually took over the leading role in government at the 1969 federal election. The enabler of this first change of power was the FDP, which in turn entered the new government as a junior partner (Baring 1982). Two decades of FDP-supported Christian Democratic dominance were now followed by a "social-liberal" era that lasted until 1982.

During the 1960s and 1970s, electoral competition was highly concentrated in a "two-and-a-half" party system with SPD and CDU/CSU as the two dominant parties and sole competitors for governmental leadership, and the FDP as kingmaker in between (Ware 1996: 161–5; Siaroff 2003). While the right-wing extremist NPD (National-Democratic Party) occasionally scored minor successes at state elections (Schmollinger 1986), no other party besides CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP was of relevance in the national electoral arena. Already since 1961, no other party had gained any seats in the federal parliament. Party system concentration, as well as stability, peaked at the 1972 and 1976 federal elections. More than 90 percent of all voters chose one of the two "people's parties" (Volksparteien; cf. Mintzel 1984) that displayed many attributes of catch-all parties in the sense of Kirchheimer (1966) while nonetheless retaining distinct policy profiles on core issues of domestic and foreign policy (Schmidt 1985). The effective number of parties and party system fractionalization scored all-time lows of 2.4 and 0.58. Electoral volatility (Pedersen 1979) was down to 3.5 from 8.5 in 1953. At the same time, electoral mobilization reached peak values, with less than 10 percent of the electorate abstaining.

1980 to 2005: Diminishing Party System Stability and Fragmentation on the Left

During its early years, the SPD–FDP coalition enacted an ambitious reform agenda of political, economic, and cultural modernization in domestic and foreign policy. By the mid-1970s, however, it began to run out of steam, not least due to the economic fallout of the 1973 and 1979 oil crises (Paterson and Southern 1991: 202–7, 228–9). At the same time, the "participatory revolution" (Kaase 1984) made itself increasingly felt in the country's public life. Following the tracks of the 1968 students' movement, hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets to support the new social movements and their protest agenda of ecology, international peace, and equality of women and minorities (Dalton and Küchler 1990; Rucht 1994). These developments also marked a turning point for the evolution of the German party system (Dalton 1984b). In 1980, the Green party was founded as the electoral arm of the new social movements (Frankland and Schoonmaker 1992; Poguntke 1993). While it failed to overcome the electoral system's 5 percent threshold in that year, it passed it comfortably at the subsequent federal election in 1983—a success of high symbolic value, since for the first time in a quarter century it awarded national parliamentary representation to a party other than the CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP. The Greens found their seats on the opposition benches to the left of the Social Democrats, which had lost power in 1982 due to yet another coalition change of the Liberals who had teamed up again with the Christian Democrats. Since then, the Greens have turned into a constant of German electoral politics, although until recently tied in a symbiotic relationship to the Social Democrats—relying on them

as the only feasible coalition partner and competing with them for the same reservoir of "new left" voters of the post-materialist middle class (Poguntke 1999; Falter and Klein 2003). Their emergence changed the character of party competition toward a model of alternating governments between two camps of one dominant and one minor party each—a leftist camp of SPD and Greens and a "bourgeois" camp of CDU/CSU and FDP.

The breakdown of the socialist German Democratic Republic and East Germany's accession to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990 led to further differentiation of the party system, once again on the left. Mergers with newly founded or existing regional sister organizations allowed the West German parties to expand their reach into East Germany so that the supply structure of the party system remained remarkably stable despite the profound transformation of the political system (Jesse 2013; Niedermayer 2013). The only major innovation was the establishment of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). As the successor organization of the former East German state party SED (Socialist Unity Party), the PDS at first was relevant only in the East and displayed little ability to attract voters in the West (Neu 2007). This changed at the 2005 federal election, which marked yet another important turning point in German electoral history (Spier et al. 2007). Ultimately, this development can be traced back to the first-ever change of power that resulted not from a party's shifted coalition preference but directly from an election result, which took place in 1998.

At this federal election, the Social Democrats had been able to gain more votes than the Christian Democrats, thus for the second time after 1972 temporarily offsetting the traditional electoral asymmetry between the two large parties. More importantly, the election result allowed, for the first time, a complete government turnover. A "red-green" center-left coalition of the Social Democrats and Greens ousted the incumbent "black-yellow" center-right coalition of CDU/CSU and FDP. However, narrowly re-elected in 2002, it found itself soon confronted with increasing economic problems (declining growth, rising unemployment, and subsequent budgetary problems for the pension system). Its response was the "Agenda 2010," a far-reaching program of market-oriented social policy and labor market reforms (Camerra-Rowe 2004; Schmidt 2007). It drew heavy criticism from within the SPD itself as well as its long-standing allies within the German cleavage system, the trade unions, and other forces of the traditional socio-economic left that denounced it as a "neoliberal" attack on the welfare state (Hegelich et al. 2011). In this climate of estrangement on the left, the PDS was able to gain traction also among West German voters (Olsen 2007). It could capitalize on this at the 2005 election, which had been called early by the Social Democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who felt he could no longer rely on the loyalty of his own party's MPs.

While the Social Democrats still managed to come out at least on par with the Christian Democrats at this election, from then on they had to face direct competition for left-leaning voters from two ideologically neighboring parties in all regions of the country—the Greens on "new politics" issues of culture, lifestyle, and environmentalism, and the PDS, in 2007 renamed the Left, on socio-economic issues of "old politics" (Schwander and Manow 2017). Importantly, while the SPD cooperated with the PDS/Left in several East German state governments, it has always refused to team up with this party at the national level, due to fundamental disagreements in central policy areas, most notably foreign policy (Spier 2013).

The 2005 federal election marked the beginning of a period in which government formation has been rendered increasingly difficult by the ongoing differentiation of the party system (Saalfeld and Schoen 2015; Schoen and Weßels 2016). Regarding electoral accountability, the 1998 and 2002 elections had been unique in German electoral history because they saw direct competition between clear and discrete electoral alternatives: a center-left alliance of SPD and Greens, and a center-right alliance of CDU/CSU and FDP. Before 1998, changes in government had always come about through parties shifting coalition allegiances. From 2005 onward, however, the prospects of building majorities for viable governments became notoriously precarious (Bytzek and Huber 2011). At that election, neither the "bourgeois" coalition of CDU/CSU and FDP nor the leftist coalition of SPD and Greens came out with a parliamentary majority. A Grand Coalition of the election's main competitors, the large center-right and center-left parties CDU/CSU and SPD, appeared as the only feasible option to form a viable government. It was only the second one in German history but turned out to indicate what later on was to become almost a new normality of governing Germany (Lees 2011).

At the 2005 election, many indicators of party system complexity reached new extremes (Figure 1.2). To be sure, these developments were culminations of long-term trends that had been observable since the 1980 federal election (Dalton 2014). However, so far they had been rather gradual, whereas they intensified from 2005 on and began to move in leaps and bounds (Schoen and Weßels 2016). The effective number of parties, for instance, was recorded at 3.8 at the 2005 election (up from 2.5 in 1980), whereas the combined vote share of the two large parties fell below 70 percent (1980: 87.4 percent). Electoral volatility doubled from 3.6 in 1980 over 5.0 in 2002 to 7.6 in 2005. Party system fractionalization went up from 0.61 in 1980 to 0.73 in 2005. In addition, the proportion of voters that split their first and second votes between different parties increased more than two-fold, from 10.1 percent in 1980 to 24.5 percent in 2005. Paralleling these trends, turnout declined quite steadily from 88.6 percent in 1980 to 77.7 percent in 2005. Another noteworthy development concerned the timing of voters' decision-making. Between the mid-1960s and 1980, the share of late deciders that took their decisions only while the election campaigns were underway remained stable at about 15 percent. In 2005,

by way of contrast, the recorded share amounted to over 50 percent (Plischke and Bergmann 2012).

Still, the 2005 election did not define a final culmination point of the overall trajectory toward increasing instability of the German electoral process. The "fluid five-party system" (Niedermayer 2008) of CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, and the Left that had resulted from the changes in voting behavior over the past quarter century marked by no means a new equilibrium (Poguntke 2014). To a degree surpassing rather than matching expectations, the impression of a system in intensifying flux was fully confirmed by the subsequent three federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017 (Rattinger et al. 2011; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2014; Schoen and Weßels 2016; Niedermayer 2018; Roßteutscher et al. 2019).

2009 to 2017: Roller-Coastering toward a Six-Party System

In 2009, vote switching was just as frequent as in the previous election, ticket-splitting even more so, and the combined vote share of the two large centrist parties yet again smaller than ever before. Regional fragmentation of voting behavior also saw a substantial increase (Rattinger et al. 2011: 119–29; Niedermayer 2012), whereas late deciding remained at about the same high level as at the previous election (Plischke and Bergmann 2012) and turnout dropped considerably. If anything, at the federal election of 2013, voters rocked the party system even more. This was an election of paradoxes (Schmitt-Beck et al. 2014). Electoral volatility was larger than ever, yet again surpassing the all-time high of the previous election by a considerable margin. At the same time, the CDU/CSU as the most successful party at this election failed, by just a hair's width, to obtain an absolute majority of seats, which would have allowed it to form the first-ever single-party majority government in the German Federal Republic. Obviously, rising volatility must not always spur party system fragmentation, but can at times also lead to an astounding amount of (re-)concentration, albeit only of an unstable nature (for similar developments in the UK see Fieldhouse et al. 2020: 9–49). On the other hand, the FDP, which had participated in more national governments than any other party, lost two-thirds of the record vote share it had scored in 2009. As a consequence, for the first time, it failed to overcome the 5 percent threshold of the electoral system and lost all mandates in the federal parliament.

Another striking feature of the 2013 election was that, even when not counting the evicted Liberals, a much larger share of votes than ever before went to parties that failed to gain entry into the national parliament. More than one out of ten voters chose a party that did not win any mandates. 2.2 percent, for instance, voted for the Pirates Party—a result that, in fact, was considered surprisingly weak at the time, since this party, although a complete newcomer, had occasionally scored over 10 percent in public opinion polls and collected enough votes at state elections

to send representatives to four legislatures during the previous national electoral cycle (Koschmieder and Niedermayer 2015).

More importantly, more than twice as many votes went to another new party that, unlike the Pirates Party, arrived on the electoral stage to stay there. With 4.7 percent of the second votes, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) came very close to winning mandates—a remarkable success for a party that had only been founded half a year before the election. During the following electoral cycle, the AfD was voted into the European Parliament as well as into most state parliaments. Finally, at the federal election of 2017, it also made it into the federal parliament. This meant that a right-wing populist party was able to gain parliamentary representation at the national level for the first time, and it did so with more votes than the FDP, the Greens, and the Left, rendering it the strongest opposition party (Schroeder and Weßels 2019a). Since the FDP was nonetheless voted back into parliament, after the 2017 election, the federal parliament thus—for the first time since 1953—consisted of delegates from six parties.

As a consequence of these developments, at the 2017 election, almost every indicator of party system fragmentation and instability was pushed to a new high in comparison to all previous elections—including the founding election of 1949 (Figure 1.2). Turnout is the only exception. Amounting to 76.1 percent, it indicated a slight trend reversal compared to 2013, although not a return to participation rates as they had been reached up until 2005. Late deciding, by contrast, had gone continuously further up since 2009, reaching 55 percent in 2017 (Plischke and Bergmann 2012; CrossSec13_Post; CrossSec17_Post). Electoral volatility and vote splitting also scored record levels, amounting to 15.0 and 27.3 percent, respectively. With 5.1, the effective number of parties also surpassed the value of 1949 that hitherto had been the highest one ever. Party system fractionalization likewise climbed to a new all-time extreme (0.80). That Christian Democrats and Social Democrats together captured only 53 percent of the votes correspondingly marked a new low (Dietz and Roßteutscher 2019). This drastically diminished level of electoral support for the two centrist "people's parties" is the result of a massive, though temporally staggered drain of voters from each of them. It hit the Social Democrats earlier and more dramatically in 2009. With 20.5 percent at the 2017 election, they scored less than half the vote shares they had regularly obtained in their best times during the 1970s. The Christian Democrats' electoral support appeared less drastically deflated but still indicated their weakest result ever with the exception of 1949.

Since 2005, German electoral politics has thus become ever more fluid and turbulent, rendering government formation increasingly difficult (cf. Chapter 15). It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that at another level the same period was also characterized by remarkable stability. Despite dramatic shifts in the electoral fates of parties, during all these years the country has been ruled by governments led by the same party and under the same head of government. In each coalition,

the Christian Democrats were the dominant party (though with different junior partners: once the FDP and twice the SPD), and the federal chancellor was always the CDU's leader Angela Merkel. None of the candidates that the Social Democrats successively nominated to challenge her in the competition for the chancellorship at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 elections (Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Peer Steinbrück, and Martin Schulz) was able to surpass her popularity. By the time of the 2021 election, the "Merkel era" will have drawn level with the thus far longest chancellorship, by Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl (1982 to 1998).

Below the Surface: Electoral Dealignment and Realignment

Phenomena like increasing volatility, split-ticket voting, late-deciding, and abstention as well as party system fragmentation and the emergence of new parties are behavioral manifestations of long-term processes of electoral change that profoundly alter the relationship between citizens and political parties (Crewe and Denver 1985; Dalton et al. 2002; Dalton 2018). Dealignment indicates a withering away of the links between people and parties, gradually dissolving voter groups' traditional loyalties to specific parties. Realignment likewise indicates a process of dissolution of traditional party loyalties, however, one that is not leading to destructuration and entropy but ultimately to a new pattern (Flanagan and Dalton 1984; Dalton et al. 1984a).

Realignment may be envisaged as a temporary destructuring and subsequent restructuration of a party system and its voter base. After a phase of uncertainty and potentially profound change in which familiar patterns of electoral behavior weaken or even disappear, it ultimately results in a new more or less stable equilibrium of the relationship between voters and parties. Dealignment, by contrast, changes electoral politics in more fundamental ways. Where realignment reshapes the linkages between certain voter groups and certain parties, dealignment alters the relationship between voters and the party system overall. It denotes a unidirectional secular change in the way citizens relate to all parties toward a general erosion of long-standing patterns of loyalty and a more fluid, less predictable style of electoral politics. Political behavior is believed to become more "particularized" (Franklin et al. 1992: 407–17) or "individualized" (Dalton and Wattenberg 1993: 212–3), as traditionally stable long-term templates of voting behavior break up and are replaced by short-term factors emanating from the specific situational circumstances of particular elections as increasingly powerful drivers of voters' decision-making. Pushed to its ideal-typical extreme, a dealigned electorate is unanchored in traditional patterns of group-based party competition and its choices depend solely on the politics of the moment. Having lost "their moorings [voters and party systems] will drift in whatever direction they are propelled by unpredictable events" (Franklin et al. 1992: 413).

What drives realignment and dealignment is a matter of debate (von Schoultz 2017; Heath 2018). An influential line of reasoning stresses the importance of large-scale processes of socio-economic and cultural modernization that Western societies have undergone since World War II. Sweeping societal trends like secularization, rising standards of living through increasing affluence and social security, the tertiarization of the economy and concomitant changes in the class structure, the expansion of higher education, social and geographic mobility, and the information revolution brought about through the electronic media, in particular television, are thought to have profoundly changed citizens' outlook on the political world. Relieved from immediate concerns of physical survival and material well-being, people could increasingly turn to more sophisticated aspirations of self-fulfillment and lifestyle, but also larger questions of the human condition that reach beyond immediate personal or group concerns.

This value change led to an expansion of the traditional agenda of political contestation with its strong emphasis on issues of material well-being, by "new politics" issues concerning as of yet unrealized potentials of modernization, such as personal self-fulfillment and the emancipation of minorities in all walks of life, but also negative side effects of modernization, such as environmental pollution and climate change or the threat of nuclear war (Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1997, 2018; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). According to more recent theorizing, these transformative developments have received additional impulses in the 1990s and 2000s when the intensifying process of economic and cultural globalization added novel and often highly divisive issues to the political agenda. Immigration and the supranationalization of institutions of governance stand out among these new areas of contestation in which universalistic and integrationist "cosmopolitan" preferences are pitted against particularistic and demarcationist "parochial" preferences (Kriesi et al. 2008; Kriesi et al. 2012; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; De Vries 2018).

Other theories emphasize political factors. They argue that electoral change cannot be sufficiently explained in a bottom-up perspective as a mere by-product of social change but depends also on top-down factors connected to party competition (von Schoultz 2017; Heath 2018), most notably parties' strategies of electoral mobilization. From the perspective of classical cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), it is not voters' demand alone, but the interplay between this demand and the supply offered by the party system that explains electoral reactions to party competition (Dalton 2018). Whether and how particular emerging interests and policy demands are represented in the party system is thus an important precondition for understanding the continued success but also failure of established mainstream parties as well as the prospects of new parties (Meguid 2007). The ambiguity or distinctiveness of parties' policy profiles may also play a role, as does the amount of ideological and policy polarization between them. While adversary politics appears conducive to partisanship, the convergence of the major parties to an indistinct middle-of-the-road mainstream is assumed to foster more fluid

relationships between voters and parties (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Schmitt 2009; Spoon and Klüver 2019).

The Dealigning German Voter

Comparative research provides ample evidence for partisan and social-structural dealignment. That party attachments have been eroding has been demonstrated for many advanced democracies (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Dalton 2002; Berglund et al. 2005; Dalton 2013: 151–79; Schmitt 2009). Likewise, it is clear that the traditional cleavage groups are shrinking and that their relevance for structuring electoral choices is receding (Franklin et al. 1992; Oskarson 2005; Jansen et al. 2013). Germany belongs to those countries that have experienced a notable decline in partisanship. In the West German electorate, the share of partisans dropped steeply between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s but leveled off afterward (Arzheimer 2017). It contracted from about 80 percent to about 60 percent, where it remained for the following two decades (Figure 1.3). The strength of partisanship has also declined (Dalton 2014: 62), and its impact on vote choice seems to have weakened as well (Berglund et al. 2005). In East Germany, where people could collect electoral experiences only after German unification, the situation is better described as "pre-alignment" (Dalton 2014: 64). Spurred by accumulating experiences with competitive elections, the proportion of partisans increased slightly during the decade following the first all-German federal election in 1990, but then it likewise leveled off. More recently, the prevalence of party attachments in the East seems to have increased. But they nonetheless have remained below the West German level, and they are also less intense. Overall, then, the German Federal Republic is now considerably less partisan than it used to be forty years ago when party mobilization was at its zenith.

Whereas partisan dealignment has thus far only progressed to a point at which a majority of the electorate still feels attached to a party, social-structural dealignment was more pervasive. To some extent, partisan dealignment in Germany indeed appears as a consequence of social-structural dealignment (Arzheimer 2006). German politics was traditionally dominated by the class and religious lines of conflict (Pappi 1973). However, tertiarization led to a shrinking of the traditional core groups of the socio-economic cleavage, and secularization in an analogous way hollowed out the foundations of the religious cleavage. Nowadays, the working class and the old middle class constitute only minorities of the workforce, and the same applies to Catholics and faithful churchgoers (Elff 2013). Yet, while the structuring power of membership in these groups for electoral choices may have receded, especially for the working class, it appears not to have evaporated completely (Weßels 2000; Elff and Roßteutscher 2011, 2017). All in all,

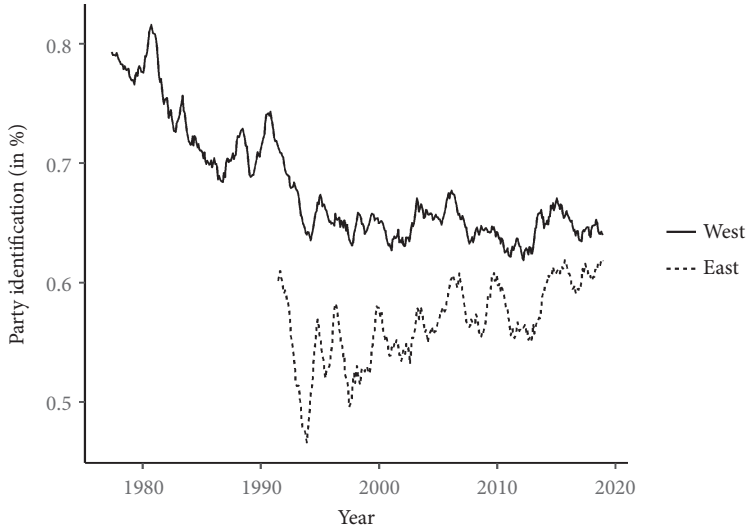

Fig. 1.3 Partisanship in Germany, 1977/1991–2018

Note: Aggregated monthly shares of respondents identifying with a party, smoothed by moving averages using a five-month window (2-1-2), replicating and updating the analyses of Arzheimer (2017: 52, 57).

Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (2020).

cleavage voting thus appears to have become much less important, although it has not disappeared for good.

In the literature, it is often taken as self-evident that processes of dealignment are accompanied by increasing responsiveness to the situational circumstances of particular elections on the part of voters. It seems quite natural to expect short-term factors to fill the explanatory void left by the decline of long-standing electoral loyalties. Accordingly, issues and candidate personalities as well as the political information flows to which voters are exposed through the parties' campaigning, and the media are expected to weigh nowadays more heavily in electoral choices than they used to in the past (Dalton and Wattenberg 1993: 207, 212–3; Dalton 2000: 924–5; Gabriel et al. 2020: 22). Subjective "forces of entropy," which render electoral behavior more situational and individualistic, should thus ultimately take precedence over the traditional "forces of structure," which are rooted in objective circumstances and render choices more uniform and patterned (Weber and Franklin 2018). However, the evidence on the long-term development of issue or candidate voting is mixed at best. Unequivocal confirmation that short-term factors or the flow of electoral information have turned into more powerful predictors of electoral choice is largely missing.

The Realigning German Voter

In many advanced industrial democracies, the structure of party conflict is no longer adequately described by the unidimensional opposition between left and right. Instead, it often displays a two-dimensional pattern, organized by two cross-cutting left–right (or progressive–conservative) dimensions, one socio-economic, the other socio-cultural (Lachat 2017; von Schoultz 2017; Dalton 2018). The unfolding of this more complex constellation of conflict started in the 1960s on the left side of the ideological spectrum. It was spurred by the "silent revolution" of value change from materialism to post-materialism (Inglehart 1977) and the emergence of a "new politics" agenda that resulted from this new set of priorities (Baker et al. 1981). Up to this point, the opposition between left and right had been primarily defined in terms of the traditional confrontation between Social Democratic and Socialist parties on the one hand and Liberals as well as Conservatives on the other over the amount of state intervention in the market with regard to economic and social policies (Downs 1957)—the class cleavage of industrial society (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

The politicization of the new post-materialist values from the 1970s onward led to a differentiation within the left. It transformed the conflict structure from a bipolar one into a triangular constellation. The traditional socio-economic left found itself no longer only in opposition to advocates of the free market on the right but also increasingly to a "new left" that articulated post-materialist concerns (Fuchs 1991). Whereas the "old left" was concerned about redistributing the wealth generated by the industrial society in order to improve the material living conditions of the working class and disadvantaged groups more generally, the socio-cultural left took position against the negative side effects of the "paradigm of growth" that drove this production model (Weßels 1991). In Germany, this conflict was at first fought out inside the SPD (Dalton 1984b), but, eventually, it gave rise to the creation and successful establishment of a new party—the Greens, which made representation of these demands its core mission (Frankland and Schoonmaker 1992; Poguntke 1993).

However, the crystallization of the new line of conflict was not complete with this sub-differentiation on the left. The opposite pole on this dimension was still vacant. The main antagonist of the "green-alternative-libertarian" (Hooghe et al. 2002) vision of all-encompassing inclusiveness with regard to the environment as well as plural forms of life was yet to emerge on the scene. However, the transformation of social and political life that new social movements and green-alternative parties were able to achieve during the following decades appears to have spurred a "silent counterrevolution" (Ignazi 1992) of those holding "traditionalist-authoritarian-nationalistic" preferences (Hooghe et al. 2002), with right-wing populist parties as their political spearhead (Minkenberg 1998; Bornschier 2010; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Accordingly, the surge in votes for

populist parties since the 1980s is seen "in large part as a reaction against progressive cultural change" (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 2–3). More strongly emphasizing material interests, other authors interpret this development in terms of real or imagined adverse consequences of open markets and increased immigration for the labor market and welfare prospects of "globalization losers" (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Manow 2018).

While right-wing populist parties already had been gaining strength in many European countries for some time (Mudde 2019), Germany—presumably as a consequence of its traumatic history under National Socialist totalitarian rule—for a long time appeared immune to this trend (Bornschier 2010, 2012). This began to change in the aftermath of the 2013 federal election, at which the AfD jumpstarted to a near success, just narrowly failing to pass the 5 percent threshold (Schmitt-Beck 2014). In 2013, the AfD had campaigned primarily on an economically liberal and culturally conservative platform with Euroskepticism as its core (Arzheimer 2015). Its main issue was the proposition to dismantle the Eurozone, in response to the European sovereign debt crisis (Grimm 2015). However, during the subsequent electoral cycle, the AfD transformed its character profoundly. In 2015, after a period of intense in-fighting, party members ousted the party's founders and elected a new leadership with a clearly more radical agenda (Jäger 2019). From then on, the AfD unequivocally showed all the hallmarks of a right-wing populist party of the kind that had already much earlier begun to make significant inroads into the electoral markets of other European countries (Schroeder and Weßels 2019b).

Strategically responding to the European refugee crisis of 2015, the AfD chose opposition to immigration as its core issue, with a strong Islam-critical tinge (Geiges 2018). Its populist outlook manifested itself in a pervasive repulsion of all established "system parties" and their elites on behalf of "the" people. Thus, mutating into a full-fledged right-wing populist party only after having scored initial successes and thereby gaining public visibility, the AfD was able to establish itself as a non-negligible player in Germany's party competition quasi "through the back door" (Schmitt-Beck 2017; Arzheimer and Berning 2019). That the party sees its mission in rolling back the last decades' cultural transformation toward a more cosmopolitan society becomes evident from its platform as well as from statements of its leaders. Thus, at the 2017 federal election, voters at long last terminated Germany's exceptionality among European democracies as a context in which right-wing populist parties could not gain a foothold. The German party system now displays the same two-dimensional configuration (Figure 1.4; for similar classifications derived from parties' programmatic positions and expert ratings see Lehmann et al. (2019) and Thomeczek et al. (2019)) that for quite some time has been recorded in other Western European countries (Dalton 2018: 109–37). Remarkably, parties are spread out much farther on the socio-cultural conflict dimension than on the socio-economic dimension.

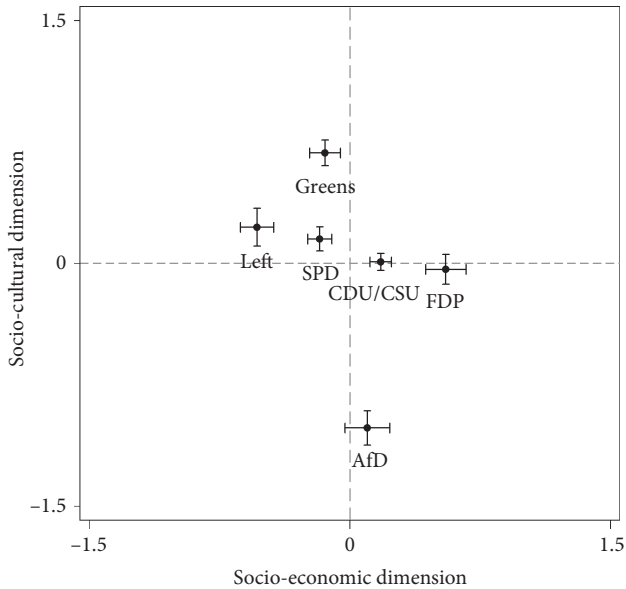

Fig. 1.4 The two-dimensional party system at the 2017 federal election

Note: Entries are standardized means of principal component factors within voter groups (second votes), with 95 percent confidence intervals; component factors are derived from a factor analysis, which delivered a two-dimensional solution based on respondents' self-placement with regard to the following position issues: socio-economic dimension = government interventions in economy, government reduction of income inequalities, low taxes vs. strong welfare state; socio-cultural dimension = facilitate vs. impede immigration, promote European unification (drawing on Schilpp 2018).

Source: CrossSec17_Cum.

An Era of Crises

The relationship between policy demand on the part of voters and policy supply by the parties may become especially critical during times of crisis (Hooghe and Marks 2018). "Large, cataclysmic events of national scope and extended duration" (Miller and Shanks 1996: 132) are often claimed to bear a particularly large potential for unsettling the alignments between voter groups and parties. In their analysis of recent British elections, Fieldhouse et al. (2020) proposed the notion of "electoral shocks" to conceptualize the potential relevance of such exceptional occurrences for electoral behavior under conditions of widespread dealignment. Electoral shocks are conceived as "unavoidable, high-salience changes or events that can prompt large sections of the population to update their political evaluations and party preferences" (Fieldhouse et al. 2020: 31). Compared to the politics

of "normal times," they stand out by their power to break through voters' inclination to process information selectively and rationalize their experiences in ways consistent with previously held dispositions and attitudes (Lodge and Taber 2013). They do so by massively raising the salience of certain issues and constricting the political agenda, eroding or strengthening attributions of party competence, and altering party images. Yet, how specific electoral shocks ultimately play out depends to a considerable extent on how parties respond to them (Fieldhouse et al. 2020: 31–44). In this regard, the three federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017 are clearly special. Each of them took place in the more or less immediate aftermath of a major crisis with far-reaching social ramifications, to which parties were forced to react.

The election of 2009 was held shortly after the global financial crisis of 2008, which went down in history as the world's worst financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Tooze 2018). Triggered by the breakdown of the American investment bank Lehman Brothers, within days it led the international finance system to the brink of collapse, which could only be prevented by unprecedented government bailout programs for financial institutions, stimulus packages for reviving the economy, and other state interventions whose hitherto unseen scope was only matched by the speed with which they were implemented. Germany was hit very hard by the crisis, but it got through it considerably better than many comparable countries. Although GDP declined by almost 6 percentage points in 2009, the German labor market was harmed much less, and economic recovery set in more rapidly than in other countries (Enderlein 2010). By the time of the federal election, solid growth had already set in and continued at higher rates than in most other European countries.

The European sovereign debt crisis of 2010 onward was to a significant extent a consequence of the preceding global financial crisis. Having invested huge sums for government interventions to rescue banks and stop economic decline, several member countries of the European common currency zone were unable to repay or refinance their public debt or bail out over-indebted banks. Other EU countries, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund were repeatedly forced to bail out these countries to prevent them from state insolvency (Hall 2012; Copelovitch et al. 2016). Germany took a leading role in these rescue policies, although conditioning them upon strict austerity measures. The German government was able to muster the necessary parliamentary support for its course of conditional assistance, though not without difficulty. As the 2013 federal election came into sight, the issue was hotly contested, and important actors demanded to suspend support for the indebted countries (Bulmer 2014). The most vocal of these critics was the AfD, which was founded in early 2013 by, among others, liberal economists, with the express aim to provide an electoral alternative to the apparent all-party consensus to assist the ailing countries of the European South (Schmitt-Beck 2014).

Finally, in the midst of the electoral cycle that led to the 2017 federal election, Germany was deeply shaken by the 2015 European refugee crisis. After a long period of rising numbers of asylum seekers, mainly seeking refuge from the Syrian civil war and domestic strife in countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq, as well as economic migrants reaching Europe across the Mediterranean or via the Balkans, the situation dramatically culminated in the fall of 2015, when the federal chancellor Angela Merkel in a flash ruling decided to allow entry into the Federal Republic for hundreds of thousands of refugees who were stranded in Hungary. All in all, more than one million asylum seekers moved to Germany during that year. At first, a newly discovered German "welcome culture" dominated public reactions to the refugee crisis, but quickly immigration turned into a matter of bitter domestic dispute (Mader and Schoen 2019). Although a series of national and European measures led to a sharp decline in the number of immigrants (Wiesendahl 2016; Mushaben 2017), the topic remained high on the public agenda up until the election (Blätte et al. 2019). The style and tone of party competition became more and more controversial from then on, not least due to the AfD leadership's decision to place opposition to immigration at the heart of its increasingly-nativist rhetoric (Niedermayer 2016).

Studying the Changing German Voter

This volume presents in-depth analyses of German voters' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. Investigating changing voters in the context of changing parties, campaigns, and media, it aims for a better understanding of the amount and character of the fluidity increasingly observable in present-day electoral politics as well as of its backgrounds and consequences for the prospects of democratic governance in Germany. At the same time, it treats Germany as a testbed for examining general theories of political behavior and electoral democracy, thus addressing broader questions of citizen politics in advanced industrial democracies and its development in the early 21st century. The analyses discern how today's politically mobile citizens coped with the increasingly difficult choices they were confronted with at the most recent elections, and what repercussions followed from these developments for the dynamics of the party system and the functioning of representative democracy.

All chapters of the book draw on the rich database that was compiled by the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) across the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections (cf. Schmitt-Beck et al. 2010b). At the heart of this study are numerous interlocking surveys of different kinds, which allow for examining the dynamics of voters' beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in great detail. They encompass extensive cross-section face-to-face surveys, combining pre-and post-election waves, long-term and short-term panel surveys conducted face-to-face and online, rolling

cross-section campaign surveys conducted per telephone, and a series of cross-sectional online surveys fielded continuously every three months over the entire electoral cycles from 2009 to 2013 and 2013 to 2017. Supplementary instruments include surveys of the candidates running for parliamentary mandates at the three federal elections, content analyses of political news coverage on TV and in the press, and quasi-experimental data on the chancellor candidates' TV debates held at each of the three elections. Some analyses additionally utilize electoral data from other sources, such as survey data from previous German national election studies, cross-national survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), and content analyses of parties' election platforms conducted by the Manifesto Project.

The book is organized along the three lead questions evoked earlier. Part II examines how the recent turbulences in German electoral behavior came about. Part III explores how the changes of the party system that resulted from these developments fed back into voters' attitudes and decision-making. Theoretically, these chapters relate to the realignment perspective, with a focus on its backgrounds in Part II and implications in Part III. Part IV refers to dealignment and examines the relevance of situational factors for voters' attitudes and choices at the most recent federal elections.

Combining long-term and medium-term perspectives, the four chapters of Part II examine the processes that led to the culmination of the party system's fragmentation at the 2017 federal election. Chapter 2 sets the stage with an analysis of the evolution of traditional cleavage voting since the first federal election in 1949. To understand the long-term decline in electoral support for the two parties at the gravitation center of the German party system, SPD and CDU/CSU, the chapter compares the relevance of compositional effects, originating from the shrinking sizes of these parties' traditional socio-economic and religious core support groups, and linkage effects, resulting from these groups' diminishing relevance for structuring their members' behavior at the ballots. The chapter shows how a protracted weakening of traditional social-structural alignments rendered the two centrist parties' voter support increasingly precarious. Yet, where did voters go, and why? The following three chapters address these questions from different theoretical angles. Their common reference is the two-dimensional conception of political space that distinguishes the traditional socio-economic from a new socio-cultural line of conflict.

Applying a cross-nationally comparative and longitudinal perspective that covers the period from the 1990s to 2017, Chapter 3 investigates the role of changes in parties' policy profiles for voters' shifts in party support. Drawing on Downs' (1957) positional logic of party competition, it examines whether the growing success of right-wing populist parties, notably the German AfD, was a response to programmatic moves of the mainstream center-left and center-right parties to the left. Chapter 4, by contrast, emphasizes the role of issue salience for right-wing

populist party support in Germany. Using data continuously collected from 2009 to 2017, it explores whether the AfD's electoral success reflects a shift in issue importance from the socio-economic to the socio-cultural dimension of conflict, for which the issue of immigration has in recent times become particularly pertinent. With a special focus on partisanship, Chapter 5 looks at another facet of the increasingly disruptive power of conflicts over the immigration issue. Partisan identities are an important mediator between traditional cleavages and electoral choices. The chapter studies whether and in which ways the European sovereign debt crisis and the refugee crisis contributed to a weakening or even restructuration of German voters' party attachments.

The emergence and ascent of the AfD and the progressive fragmentation of the party system that it brought about are results of voters' choices. At the same time, these developments in turn make choosing more challenging for voters. They have raised the complexity of electoral decision-making, thus rendering it more difficult for electors to make up their minds about how to vote (Weßels et al. 2014). The chapters of Part III zoom in on how voters reacted to the changing supply structure of the party system. Combining a longitudinal and East–West comparative perspective, Chapter 6 examines how the AfD affected the underlying structure of inter-party electoral competition, conceived in terms of overlaps in the support bases of different parties as indicators of the availability of each party's voters for other parties. Focusing on the partisan composition of voters' networks of political discussion partners, Chapter 7 explores the correlates of this pattern in citizens' everyday communication with one another.

Drawing on Lau and Redlawsk's (2006) notion of "correct" voting, Chapter 8 studies implications of the emergence and establishment of the AfD for the consistency of voters' electoral choices with their political attitudes and preferences from the 2009 to the 2017 federal elections. Apart from registering change and stability in the rates of consistent voting, the chapter is particularly interested in the variability of the underlying modalities of how voters arrived at their decisions across the three elections. Prompted by the country's PR voting system and multi-party system, coalition governments have always been an important feature of German politics. However, the stark growth of electoral volatility and the accelerated differentiation of the parliamentary party system has rendered coalition politics more and more complex. Chapter 9 examines how voters navigate the intricacies of coalition politics under the increasingly challenging circumstances of the fragmenting party system. Drawing theoretical guidance from a juxtaposition of instrumental and expressive interpretations of coalition voting, the chapter takes a special interest in the long-term stability and change of coalition preferences.

According to the dealignment perspective, traditional mechanisms and patterns of choice are gradually dissipating from electoral politics. As traditional cleavages and partisan affiliations lose their power to structure voters' electoral attitudes

and choices, voting decisions are expected to become more contextually contingent and short-term in nature. With the "blinders of partisanship" (Dalton 2020) receding, dealigning electorates should become more sensitive to influences originating from the specific circumstances of particular elections. The chapters of Part IV examine how such situational factors resonated with voters at the most recent German federal elections and place them in perspective. Experiences of crises can be expected to figure particularly prominently among the election-specific circumstances that may leave an imprint on voting behavior. Whether this was the case at the federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017 is discussed in Chapter 10. It explores the relationship between the strongly increased electoral volatility at these elections and the fact that each of them was overshadowed by a massive crisis (the world financial and economic crisis, the European sovereign debt crisis, and the European refugee crisis).

The following chapters focus on the personalization of party preferences. Chapter 11 studies the relevance of changing candidate evaluations for voters' decisions to desert previously supported parties and switch to other parties instead. Using long-term panel data collected at the 2013 and 2017 federal elections, it investigates the push and pull effects of shifts in candidate evaluations—originating from improving or deteriorating views of the same, repeatedly nominated candidates or from differing views of parties' current candidates in comparison to their predecessors at earlier elections—on electoral volatility. Studying the impact of televised debates of the chancellor candidates, Chapter 12 looks at candidate voting from a communication point of view. Since 2002, American-style "TV duels" are a staple of German federal election campaigns. Drawing on quasi-experimental data collected at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 elections, the chapter examines the impact of these media events on voting intentions.

Chapter 13 addresses the assumption that partisan dealignment has rendered electorates more responsive to persuasive influences of the news media. Linking data on voters and media content, it examines the impact of news coverage that is valenced in ways that are favorable or unfavorable toward certain parties or candidates on evaluations of these actors during federal election campaigns. Widening the scope beyond specific sources of electoral information, Chapter 14 reflects on the claim that the erosion of long-standing partisan and group loyalties has generally increased the relevance of campaign periods for the outcomes of elections. The chapter undertakes a sweeping stocktake of a large variety of attitudes of well-known relevance for electoral behavior, aiming to assess, in longitudinal perspective, their variability during campaigns, but also in between elections. Comparing data from rolling cross-section campaign surveys conducted daily at the 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections, the chapter examines the dynamics of beliefs and attitudes within election campaigns and across elections as well as patterns of short-term campaign changes in long-term comparative perspective.

The concluding Chapter 15 summarizes the book's findings on its three lead questions: How did the turbulences that increasingly characterize German electoral politics come about? How did they in turn condition voters' decision-making? How were electoral attitudes, beliefs, and choices affected by situational factors that pertained to the specifics of particular elections? Reflecting on these developments' systemic consequences the chapter discusses the ideological and affective polarization of the party system and the increasing difficulties of government formation under the German parliamentary system. Looking ahead the chapter closes with some speculations about the prospects of electoral politics in Germany.

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