

Schmitt-Beck, Rüdiger; Roßteutscher, Sigrid; Schoen, Harald; Weßels, Bernhard; Wolf, Christof

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## The Changing German Voter

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# The Changing German Voter

*Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, Sigrid Roßteutscher, Harald Schoen,  
Bernhard Weßels, and Christof Wolf<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

After decades of slow and gradual change, the German electorate's behavior has undergone a massive transformation over the three federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017. Vote choices have become much more volatile and accordingly less predictable. This resulted in rapid differentiation of the party system, which in turn renders decision-making for voters at subsequent elections harder. With regard to important structural parameters such as volatility and the fragmentation of the party system, German electoral politics today shows features that resemble its character at the very first federal election, 70 years ago. Thus, in important ways, Germans' electoral behavior appears to have come full circle. At the same time, these developments are not unique to Germany. In many respects, they mirror processes that also affect other advanced industrial democracies in Western Europe as well as in other parts of the world (Przeworski 2019: 83–7, 138–9). In the early 21st century, in democracies around the globe electoral politics appears to have entered a new era of instability.

In the German setting, long-term processes of social and cultural modernization of the kind typical for all advanced industrial democracies but also the unique historical event of formerly Socialist East Germany's accession to the German Federal Republic's liberal democratic regime contributed to this development. In addition, during the past decade, the German parties and their voters were confronted with an unprecedented succession of dramatic political challenges that may have profoundly affected the elections conducted during this time. 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 long-term fallout of this crisis, the European sovereign debt crisis. The 2017 federal election, in turn, took place in the aftermath of the European

<sup>1</sup> The following reflections were completed in July 2020.

refugee crisis that had peaked in 2015. In the course of this period of electoral turmoil, Germany's second democracy forfeited an element of exceptionality that for decades had set it apart from comparable countries. After several failed attempts to establish a right-wing populist party in previous decades, the country's national parliament now for the first time also includes a sizable number of representatives from such a party (the AfD).

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 and choices affected by situational factors that pertained to the specifics of particular elections? These are the questions addressed by this book. The following section summarizes the study's findings on the behavior of changing voters in the context of changing parties, campaigns, and media during the period of its hitherto most dramatically increased fluidity. Subsequently, it will be discussed what consequences these developments entail for the polarization of the party system and the formation of governments under the German parliamentary system of governance. The chapter closes with some necessarily lofty speculations about the prospects of electoral politics in Germany.

## **An Electorate in Flux**

### **A Fragmenting Party System**

How did the turbulences that increasingly characterize German electoral politics come about? Chapters 2 to 5 present facets of evidence that together provide an account of the processes that spurred the recent boost in party system fragmentation. Chapter 2 retraces the long-term process of cleavage decline that prepared the stage for the recent reconfiguration of German electoral politics. Focusing on the traditionally dominant center-right and center-left parties, the SPD and the CDU/CSU, the chapter shows how the traditional conflict dimensions that the second German democracy had inherited from the founding period of the party system in the late 19th century eroded and weakened their grip on voters. After a long period of gradually diminishing voter support, the most recent elections saw a dramatic slump in both parties' electoral outcomes. At first, the Social Democrats, but also with some delay and thus far less dramatic, the Christian Democrats, suffered major vote losses, calling into question their established role as gravitation centers of party competition (see Chapter 1). Examining survey data from all federal elections since 1949, the chapter shows how the socio-economic cleavage and the religious cleavage lost their structuring power for electoral behavior. The past decades saw not only a substantial shrinking of both parties' traditional core voter groups in the course of ongoing socio-economic and cultural modernization. The chapter also finds that these groups' inclination to support "their"

respective parties at the ballots decreased substantially. Indeed, for the parties' electoral fate, the latter process appears as the more significant one (see Goldberg 2020 for similar findings in other countries). Counterfactual simulation analyses suggest that the deterioration of the Social Democrats' and Christian Democrats' electoral standing is mainly attributable to waning loyalties on the part of traditional core groups whose remaining members appear to see these parties no longer as unquestionably self-evident choices.

This protracted weakening of traditional social-structural alignments rendered the traditional centrist parties' electoral basis increasingly precarious. Yet, elections are zero-sum games. Voters who desert parties need to go someplace else. Shrinking support for certain parties must be mirrored by increasing vote shares for other parties. Importantly, even after the fading of Germany's traditional cleavage structure, a two-dimensional perspective on party competition is necessary to make sense of these movements. It still distinguishes a socio-economic and socio-cultural dimension of contestation, but the content of the latter has changed (Rovny and Polk 2019). Of the many issues that pertain to this dimension and have over the years been more or less salient in public political debate (Kriesi et al. 2008), immigration has in recent years proven particularly divisive.

As Chapters 3 and 4 point out, vote losses of Western European center-right and center-left parties during the past two decades have often been accompanied by an upswing of parties with pronounced positions on the socio-cultural dimension of conflict, in more recent years in particular right-wing populist parties (Przeworski 2019: 87–100). Germany experienced this process with some delay, when the AfD, which had already scored close to 5 percent of the votes when it first ran at the 2013 federal election, was able to enter the national parliament as the strongest opposition party at the subsequent election of 2017. From an internationally comparative point of view, Chapter 3 characterizes this development as a normalization process. Somewhat belatedly, it repeated patterns of electoral change that had been observable for some time already in other Western European countries, although not in Germany, despite similar preconditions on the demand side of voters (Bornschieer 2012).

Taken together, the evidence presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 suggests that the ground for this development had indeed been laid much earlier but required special conditions to become manifest at elections. According to Chapter 4, already before the 2009 federal election, a shift in issue salience from socio-economic to socio-cultural concerns had occurred among German voters (see also Dalton 2018), rendering this conflict dimension more salient and divisive than topics of redistributive policies (Franzmann et al. 2020). In particular, a large part of the electorate deemed immigration policy increasingly important (see also Chapter 6). The chapter demonstrates that this advantaged the AfD at the ballots in two ways: directly, as voters concerned about immigration showed a clear tendency to support this party, and indirectly, as the topic's high salience also boosted voting based

on positional proximity regarding demarcationist vs. integrationist stances on this issue (Pappi et al. 2019). The electorate's mean position on this issue tended toward the demarcationist pole, and this changed overall rather little during the past decade. From 2013 on, the AfD catered to this demand. Nonetheless, it was not self-evident that it would profit from voters' opposition to immigration. That immigration-critical voters opted in increasing numbers for the AfD had also to do with programmatic changes of the mainstream parties.

This is demonstrated by Chapter 3, which draws attention to the dynamic interplay between voter demand and party supply as a precondition of electoral volatility. It finds that the growing electoral success of right-wing populist parties, in Germany just as in other Western European countries, was a response to shifts of mainstream center-left and center-right parties to the left on the new socio-cultural dimension of conflict. This did not lead to a convergence between these parties, to be sure. But their tandem moves to the left opened up a representation gap in political space that could be occupied by new political entrepreneurs from the right. While not yet clearly committed to a nativist agenda in the beginning, the AfD resolutely seized this opportunity during the refugee crisis of 2015—an event that amounted to a veritable “electoral shock” (Fieldhouse et al. 2020) with the power to undermine even strong party attachments, as is shown by Chapter 5. Accordingly, Chapter 3 demonstrates how voters' likelihood to support right-wing populist parties, in particular the AfD, increased when the parties they had previously chosen moved away from them in policy space. From this perspective, the emergence and establishment of the AfD appear as a result of mainstream parties' failure to address the more traditional socio-cultural preferences held by significant segments of the electorate.

While Chapter 3 applies a wide-angle lens and does not zoom in on the specific issue content that drove these processes, Chapter 4 suggests that the controversy about more restrictive or liberal immigration policies played a pivotal role. It demonstrates that, over time, the immigration issue became more and more consequential for electoral behavior. Chapter 5 provides further detail to this picture by showing that the refugee crisis of 2015 played a major role as a catalyst in these processes (see also Mader and Schoen 2019; Schoen and Gavras 2019). With a focus on partisanship, it attests to the increasingly disruptive power of conflicts on the socio-cultural dimension that revolve around questions of societal openness and demarcation, notably over the issue of immigration. The chapter departs from the premise that urgently pressing crises with far-reaching implications often impose policies on governing parties that do not conform to their images and which they otherwise would not have chosen—and which faithful partisans might profoundly dislike. Comparing the European sovereign debt crisis and the refugee crisis, two events for which this was clearly the case, the chapter finds that the latter, but not the former has led to a major shake-up of party attachments. Partisans that held no strong preferences on immigration policy followed their parties' lead and adapted

their positions to the policies pursued by them. But in cases of more intensely felt discrepancies, partisans tended to devalue their parties, sometimes to the point of abandoning them for good. Intensely negative immigration attitudes most clearly undermined identifications with the CDU, but to some extent also leftist, more immigration-friendly parties. Sometimes they even led to switching allegiances, and it was the AfD that profited from these defections.

### Challenged Voters

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 have made choosing more challenging for voters. They 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). How did these changed conditions feedback into voters' decision-making? This is explored by Chapters 6 to 9. Chapter 6 examines how the AfD affected the underlying structure of inter-party electoral competition, conceived in terms of the availability of each party's voters for other parties. It reveals a remarkable process of double-sided electoral closure. Already when the AfD first ran in 2013, but even more pronounced at the 2017 election, its supporters were hardly available for other parties. Mirroring this self-encapsulated position within the party system, the other parties' support bases were also not open for the AfD. Thus, in voters' minds, the establishment of the AfD led to a segmentation of party competition. Suggesting that the advent of the AfD may have rendered party competition even more complex than conceived by the two-dimensional conception utilized by the previous chapters, the analysis further indicates that voters' patterns of electoral openness and closure were not only structured by the socio-economic and socio-cultural issue dimensions but also by a new divide between populist and pluralist orientations.

Complementing Chapter 6 with an interpersonal perspective, Chapter 7 reveals similar patterns in voters' social interactions. The focus of the chapter is on the prevalence of partisan agreement and disagreement in voters' everyday conversations about politics, conceived as talks with core network members that supported either the same or other parties than voters themselves. The character of these experiences is a joint product of voters' desire to seek out like-minded discussion partners, and the more or less limited availability of such persons within shared local contexts that serve as reservoirs of potential interaction partners. The reconfiguration of the party system discussed in Chapter 1 translated into an object of voters' social experience by way of changes in the partisan composition of the local contexts within which they resided (demonstrated by the chapter at the level of electoral districts). Comparing the partisan structuration of voters' discussant

networks at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections, the chapter shows how the increasing fragmentation of the party system led to more everyday political talk across party lines. But AfD supporters displayed particularly strong selectivity. More than others, these voters tended to encapsulate themselves in highly homogenous conversation networks.

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. It detects a remarkably stable amount of attitude-consistent voting for the three elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017. However, this seemingly unchanged surface concealed significant shifts in the ways voters arrived at their decisions. The 2013 federal election stood out in this regard. The 2009 and 2017 elections displayed the well-known pattern of inconsistent voting being strongly associated with low levels of political knowledge. In 2013, by contrast, inconsistent choices reflected "insurgent party protest voting." They seem to have purposively not been driven by the intent to vote in line with one's preferences. When deciding which party to choose, some citizens apparently let general discontent about the course of politics override standard factors of the voting calculus. Accordingly, inconsistent choices were strongly associated with dissatisfaction with political elites and the performance of democracy as well as sympathy for the AfD as a populist party that from early on was heavily and across the board critical of established parties and their leaders (Lewandowsky et al. 2016).

Coalition governments have always been an important feature of German politics. Chapter 9 investigates how voters navigated the complexities of coalition politics under the increasingly challenging circumstances of the fragmenting party system. The chapter analyses the role of voters' coalition considerations at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections in a dynamic perspective. It confirms that government coalitions (and options for alternative coalitions) are important political objects for voters to which they relate in consistent ways, even in times of a rapidly changing political environment. In addition, the chapter reports independent, remarkably stable effects of coalition preferences on vote choices at each of the three elections. Overall, its findings indicate that voters are neither fully instrumental nor fully expressive. They suggest that, as the party system expanded and the number of possible coalitions increased, coalition considerations have become even more important for voters.

### Situational Voting

The dealignment perspective entails the expectation that as the structuration of electoral behavior through traditional cleavages and partisan affiliations recedes, voting decisions become increasingly contextually contingent (Schoen

et al. 2017b) and short-term in nature. With partisanship and other traditional politicized identities eroding, voters are no longer able to resort to the internalized guideposts of political predispositions to make sense of politics. In the long run, the filter effect of biased information processing on the part of “rationalizing voters” (Lodge and Taber 2013) should therefore evaporate. Instead, dealigned electorates should respond more strongly to the ever-changing situational peculiarities of elections. Chapters 10 to 14 examine how situational factors resonated with voters at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. They focus on the fall-out of the crises that preceded these elections (Chapter 10), the role of the parties’ lead candidates (Chapter 11), media effects (Chapters 12 and 13), and campaign effects (Chapter 14). For lack of data covering an appropriate time span, none of these chapters can prove that short-term factors have actually become more influential in the long run. However, pointing to a greater sensitivity of apartisan voters for the politics of the moment, they provide evidence on a necessary condition for a more prominent role of situational voting under conditions of ongoing dealignment.

Building on an event-driven model of crisis-related vote change, Chapter 10 examines the role of the world financial and economic crisis, the Euro crisis, and the refugee crisis for electoral volatility at the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. It finds that the proposed causal chain from crisis experiences over changing problem priorities and shifting competence attributions to altered electoral choices has been quite tenuous at all three crises. To begin with, voters’ problem priorities were not fully aligned with the crises’ sequence. Moreover, changes in problem priorities did not always go along with changes in competence attributions. Rather, the latter to some extent reflected voters’ political predispositions. Last, although the impact of these changed attitudes on vote choices was noticeable, it remained limited. Altered party competence attributions did promote vote switching, but other factors, such as shifts in candidate evaluations (studied in more detail in Chapter 11), were also important. The chapter confirms that, through changes in problem priorities and party competence attributions, the three crises did contribute to the high electoral volatility that characterized the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. But their impact was only moderate. The massively increased mobility of voters at these elections was only to a limited extent attributable to the crises that preceded them.

Studying the role of parties’ lead candidates for voters’ choices in detail, Chapter 11 provides nuanced evidence for personalized decision-making as a driver of electoral volatility. It shows how alterations in candidate evaluations—whether they originated from improving or deteriorating views of repeatedly nominated identical candidates, or differing views of a party’s current candidate in comparison to his or her predecessor at the previous election—stimulated voters to reconsider choices taken at the previous election. As a result, they tended to abandon parties they had supported in the past when they held their candidates



in lower esteem (push effects) and moved toward other parties when they viewed their candidates more positively than the ones before (pull effects). Importantly, this concerned not only the lead candidates of the two large parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, which traditionally were considered the only serious contenders for the office of head of government. To a lesser extent, voters' likelihood to switch votes between parties was also influenced by their views of the lead candidates of the smaller parties that served as faces of their parties during the campaigns but did not compete for particular offices.

Zooming in on the Christian Democrats' and Social Democrats' chancellor candidates, Chapter 12 demonstrates the effects of these politicians' televised debates on party preferences. Such media events are a staple of campaign communication across the globe. In Germany, the so-called "TV duels" were introduced in 2002 and immediately became core elements of federal election campaigns. Attracting huge audiences and obtaining a lot of news coverage renders them the single most important communication event in federal election campaigns. The chapter finds that the TV debates of 2009, 2013, and 2017 exerted significant direct and indirect effects on voters. Both immediate exposure to these media events (at which impressions of winning or losing the "duel" were particularly relevant) and—similarly strongly—exposure to follow-up communications in the news media and within voters' networks of family, friends, and acquaintances affected the vote intentions of sizable parts of these broadcasts' audiences. Politically unsophisticated voters appeared most open to both direct and indirect debate effects.

For the same set of elections, Chapter 13 examines the electorate's responsiveness to persuasive influences of news. It shows that news coverage that was favorably or unfavorably valenced toward parties or candidates—either through the intensity and direction of its evaluative tone (statement bias) or the amount of reporting devoted to them (coverage bias)—affected voters' electoral attitudes. These media effects reached not only voters who followed the news but also individuals who did not attend to the news, presumably by means of secondary diffusion through audience members who "spread the news" further to their fellow citizens. Both TV news and the press appeared influential, though the former more clearly than the latter. Importantly, apartisan voters were more sensitive to news content than those identifying with a party (cf. Shehata and Strömbäck 2020: 64–8). However, due to the way the news media presented politics during the examined election campaigns, these effects do not seem to have affected the outcomes of the three elections. In line with the general logic of democratic-corporatist media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004), they displayed common patterns of selectivity with regard to the amount of coverage devoted to the parties and their candidates, presumably resulting from similar criteria of newsworthiness across different media that were strongly guided by power differences between parties. At the same time, the news media showed considerable restraint with regard to evaluative content and do not seem to have treated the competing parties

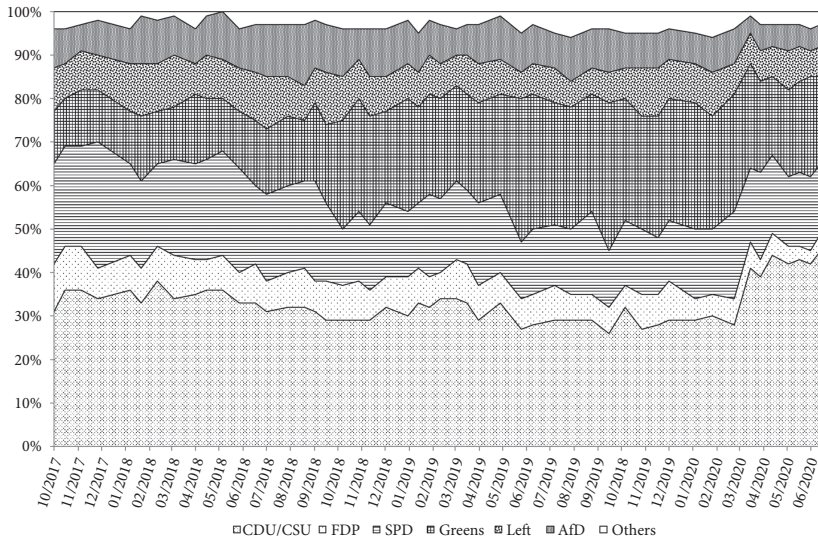
and candidates in systematically unequal ways. Due to mutual cancellation, much of the news media's potential impact on voters thus remained muted.

Examining campaign dynamics of public opinion at the 2005 to 2017 federal elections, Chapter 14 widens the scope beyond specific sources of electoral information. It proposes a four-way decomposition of the voting function depending on the variability of explanatory factors between elections and within campaigns. The chapter finds that for partisans—which despite partisan dealignment still form a majority of the electorate—election campaigns mainly served as forces of activation (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). This rendered successive elections more similar to one another and, together with economic perceptions, contributed to their predictability. Importantly, however, with growing numbers of parties, situation-specific defection from party identities has become more ubiquitous. Thus, the fragmentation of the party system has turned partisan activation into a more contingent process because partisans increasingly may choose from a broader menu of ideologically proximate parties. In line with this less strict and automatic conception of activation, coalition expectations and voting intentions for small parties fluctuated strongly both between elections and within campaigns. The chapter concludes that, although generalized patterns still dominated pre-electoral short-term dynamics, certain numerically modest situation-driven shifts may have been pivotal around the electoral threshold, with implications for the feasibility of coalitions. This suggests that, with weakened connections between citizens and parties, campaigns increasingly manifest themselves as games of strategy in which seemingly small changes can make a big difference.

## A Political System in Flux

### An Era Coming to a Close

After the 2017 federal election, the roller-coaster of German electoral politics did not stop—quite to the contrary. Polling data suggest that about a year after the election, an era finally came to a close (Figure 15.1): The duopoly of two mainstream “people’s parties,” one center-right, the other center-left, which for seven decades had defined electoral contests as the main competitors and sole aspirants to the chancellorship, has ended. Despite its massive vote losses, this yet does not so much concern the CDU/CSU, which once again took over the leading role in the federal government under its chairperson Angela Merkel as chancellor. For most of the electoral cycle, it maintained a rather stable support base at about the level it had scored at the 2017 election, amounting to about a third of the electorate. By contrast, about a year after the election the SPD’s support base virtually imploded. It stabilized at a floor amounting to just about half the size of the Christian Democrats’ voter base.



**Fig. 15.1** Party support after the 2017 federal election (percent)

*Note:* Data on “political mood” from Politbarometer polls conducted monthly by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen for the Second German Public TV channel (ZDF). The indicator was chosen because of its relative closeness to the raw data generated by vote intention questions (so-called “Sunday questions”).

*Source:* [https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Langzeitentwicklung\\_-\\_Themen\\_im\\_Ueberblick/Politik\\_I/2\\_Stimmung\\_1.xlsx](https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Langzeitentwicklung_-_Themen_im_Ueberblick/Politik_I/2_Stimmung_1.xlsx) (accessed on 14 July, 2020).

Even more importantly, the collapse of the Social Democrats was complemented by an unprecedented ascent of the Greens that from then on constantly surpassed them in the polls by a considerable margin. For about eighteen months, the Greens scored in a range not much below the CDU/CSU. However, this near parity ended with a sharp surge of the Christian Democrats to a level last seen after the 2013 federal election. It occurred in spring 2020 and can be directly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that, like previous crises, immediately turned into an “hour of the executive.” Compared to many other democracies, Germany came relatively little scathed through the first wave of the pandemic. As it seems, voters credited the leading government party (but not its junior partner) for the Grand Coalition’s handling of the crisis (Bol et al. 2020 demonstrate this phenomenon also for other countries).

Unsurprisingly, these were also years in which all parties, with the possible exception of the Greens, were deeply absorbed in—often highly divisive—internal controversies about how to adapt best to the changing conditions of declining loyalty and rising volatility on the part of voters. Leadership questions were high on the agenda. Both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats exchanged their party leaders (thereby divorcing leadership positions from government offices), not once, but repeatedly. The newly elected chairpersons were met with

great hopes—but also high expectations and little patience. Once in office, the new leaders' honeymoon period was invariably short, as major improvements of the parties' electoral standing failed to materialize. Questions of policy were also highly salient, and often connected to debates about the right choices for leadership. Some parties were deeply torn on matters of substantive strategy, indicating that today's complex structure of political conflicts is not only divisive between parties but also within parties.

The mainstream parties' internal debates mainly took the form of traditionalists seeking to stand their ground against increasingly dominant (socio-cultural) modernizers. By contrast, the AfD took several distinct moves further right by re-enacting the script of its redefining moment in 2015, i.e., leadership struggles where radicals prevailed over (relatively) moderates. In some states, the AfD's leadership consists of barely concealed right-wing extremists. Last, there have also been intense debates about coalition strategies. After painfully embarking on another Grand Coalition, the Social Democrats continued to debate almost uninterruptedly whether to continue their cooperation with the CDU/CSU or end it during the electoral cycle (see below). Within the AfD, more moderate leaders would like to see the party pursuing its agenda in government coalitions, but the radicals prefer a strategy of both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary obstruction (Schroeder and Weßels 2019b). For the other parties, the AfD is out of bounds as a coalition partner at all levels of the political system, although among some East German Christian Democrats this demarcation appears less principled. The Left, by contrast, is considered an acceptable coalition partner at least in state governments, except for the CDU.

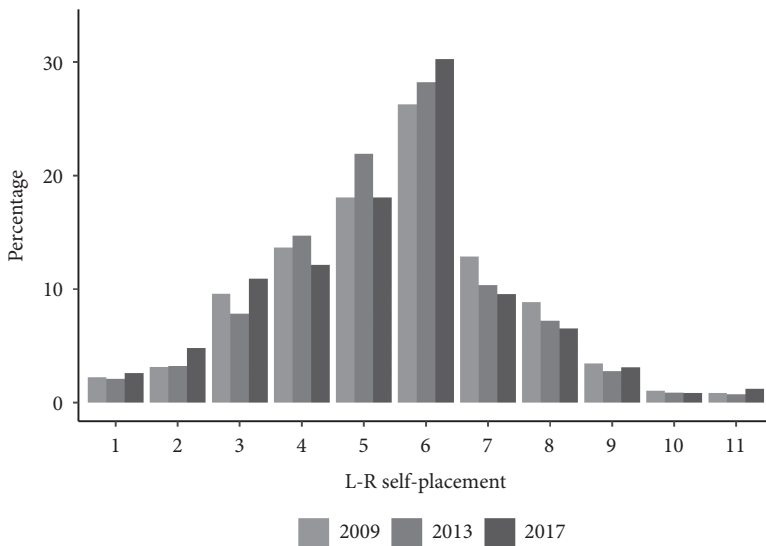
### Increasing Polarization

These latest developments imply that, after the 2017 federal election, the long-term process of party system fragmentation has continued to progress in leaps and bounds. In comparative research, party system fragmentation (Schmitt and Franzmann 2020) and more specifically the rise of populist parties (Wagschal 2020) have been found to give rise to the polarization of party systems, i.e., increasing divergence between parties and coherence within them. Traditionally, party system polarization has been conceived as a policy-related phenomenon, in which parties are viewed as objects characterized by particular ideological positions and corresponding policy profiles. It has thus typically been studied in terms of the parties' left–right positions and the distances between them. Sartori (1976: 131–216) has famously attributed the breakdown of Germany's first democracy to its party system's "polarized pluralism," that is, a pattern characterized by significant anti-system parties to the left and right and centrifugal political competition that is fought over non-negotiable principles so that it is difficult to strike bargains on

policies and form stable government coalitions. High ideological polarization thus impairs the working of democracy because it makes it harder or even impossible for parties to cooperate in governance. By undermining constructive politics polarization may damage the functioning and ultimately the stability of democratic regimes.

In democracies around the globe, political life seems to be affected by an escalating process of polarization (McCoy and Somer 2019). Yet, how polarized was Germany's party system at the 2009 to 2017 elections? Did it become more polarized over the course of these three elections? The left–right dimension allows for obtaining an impression of the party system's ideological polarization (see Wagner 2019 for a detailed evaluation of the criteria of polarized pluralism). To begin with some background, Figure 15.2 shows the distribution of voters' ideological orientations. It reveals a stable unimodal distribution of left–right positions. There is no indication of any movement in the direction of the dreaded bimodal distribution, in which significant segments of the electorate are located at the extremes rather than at the moderate center of the ideological scale (Lelkes 2016: 395–8). If there was any change at all, it consisted in the gravitation center of voters' ideological leanings moving very slightly to the left from 2009 (mean: 5.51) over 2013 (5.42) to 2017 (5.34).

Neither conceived as a state nor as a trend (Lelkes 2016: 393) does polarization thus characterize the ideological preferences of the German electorate. Yet,



**Fig. 15.2** Left–right positions of voters, 2009 to 2017 (percent)

*Note:* Data are weighted by region and demographics.

*Sources:* CrossSec09\_Cum, CrossSec13\_Cum, CrossSec17\_Cum.

**Table 15.1** Ideological polarization of voters, 2009 to 2017

	2009	2013	2017
<b>Index of ideological polarization</b>	3.59	3.25	3.85
<b>Parties' perceived left–right positions</b>			
Left	2.09	2.11	2.15
Greens	4.24	4.25	4.28
SPD	4.70	4.67	4.54
FDP	6.66	6.68	5.95
CDU/CSU	7.49	7.22	6.35
AfD	-	6.95	9.64
Left–right range of party system	5.40	5.11	7.49
Left–right range of party system (AfD excluded)	5.40	5.11	4.20

*Note:* Index of ideological polarization calculated according to the formula by Dalton (2008); analyses based on eleven-point left–right scale (range 1–11); data are weighted by region and demographics.  
*Sources:* CrossSec09\_Cum, CrossSec13\_Cum, CrossSec17\_Cum.

polarization is often originating not from voters but from political elites who use polarizing strategies to pursue political objectives (McCoy and Somer 2019). Table 15.1 provides data on the ideological polarization of the party system. The grand picture is supplied by Dalton's (2008) aggregate index of ideological party system polarization. It is derived from voters' perceptions of the parties' locations on the left–right dimension, weighted by their election results. In his seminal study, Dalton (2008: 907) registered a rather low, though slowly increasing degree of polarization for the German parties in the early 2000s. The level reported in Table 15.1 is one full point higher on the polarization scale. It is thus still not high in absolute terms, but the data signal a further small increase at the 2017 election compared to the two earlier elections. This suggests that—overall—the ideological polarization of the German party system is on the rise, although not dramatically.

The lower panels of the table provide more nuanced insights. They show how voters placed each of the parties on the left–right scale at each of the three elections. The Left and the Greens remained steadfast in place on the far respectively moderate left. The SPD and the FDP maintained their center-left and centrist locations between 2009 and 2013 but moved somewhat to the left in 2017. The CDU/CSU moved continuously to the left across all three elections, particularly strongly in 2017. This echoes the findings of Chapter 3. When the AfD emerged in 2013, voters located it slightly to the left of the CDU/CSU and right of the FDP. Yet, at the subsequent election, it was clearly perceived as a right-wing party, located not far from the endpoint of scale. This led to a considerable expansion of the range occupied by the parties on the left–right scale. At the 2009 and 2013 elections,

it amounted to less than half of the scale width, but at the 2017 election the range between the left-most party (the Left) and the party located furthest on the right—now the AfD—was much larger, amounting to three-quarters of the scale. This considerably widened spread was entirely due to the AfD's shift to the right. The span occupied by all other parties was much more restricted. In fact, in 2017, the other parties' ideological positions differed considerably less than in 2009 when the AfD did not yet exist. At the 2017 federal election, the party system thus was characterized by a very peculiar ideological structure, consisting of a rather dense cluster of established parties, ranging from the Left to the Christian Democrats and the AfD as a clear outlier, located quite a distance away from all other parties.

In recent years, the traditional policy-related conception of party system polarization in ideological terms has been supplemented by a second perspective. It views parties as objects of identification that evoke positive or negative emotional reactions, thus giving rise to “affective” polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012; 2019). Here, parties are understood as emotionally valenced group objects. As in-groups that generate a sense of identity and belongingness, they give rise to positive feelings among their members; as out-groups, they may evoke more or less intense negative feelings. Affective polarization has important ramifications for social life. Societies that are affectively polarized on party terms tend to split up into hostile camps that conceive political life in irreconcilable “us-versus-them” terms. Citizens then withdraw into echo chambers of like-minded associates, and dialogue across lines of difference is at risk of breaking down. Under such circumstances, self-reinforcing spirals of encapsulation that turn political opponents into enemies may be set in motion. Developments of this kind may ultimately endanger democracy itself as a system of governance in which societies' pluralism is managed in peaceful ways on the basis of its members' acceptance of the basic norm of “agreeing to disagree” (Kelsen 2013; Przeworski 2010). Eroding approval of this principle appears as part and parcel of an encompassing, worldwide crisis of liberal democracy. Polarized societies' hostile “tribalism” appears as an important driver of democratic backsliding and decay (McCoy and Somer 2019).

Table 15.2 presents indications of affective polarization in the German party system. Our global measure of the party system's overall polarization is a variant of an index recently proposed by Reiljan (2019). Adapting the logic of the standard measure used by studies of the American two-party system to the conditions of multi-party systems, it is based on voters' evaluations of parties on like-dislike thermometer scales, weighted by the parties' vote shares. Whereas Reiljan's (2019) index refers to partisan groups (and ignores a-partisans), our version is constructed on the basis of vote choices. Accordingly, the index aggregates information on how electors saw each of the parties they did not choose in comparison to the one they voted for. This seems appropriate for the study of a dealigning electorate in which many voters hold no party identification and in which, in particular, not enough time has yet passed to build up genuine attachments with the AfD as a young party.

Table 15.2 Affective polarization of voters, 2009 to 2017

	2009	2013	2017
<b>Index of affective polarization</b>	3.56	3.70	3.51
<b>Party thermometer scores by vote choice:</b>			
<i>Most positive score (in-party)</i>			
CDU/CSU	8.89	9.29	9.71
SPD	8.33	8.90	9.34
FDP	8.69	8.34	9.17
Greens	8.94	9.15	9.36
Left	8.87	9.42	9.23
AfD	-	8.78	8.60
Average across parties	8.74	8.81	9.23
Average across parties (AfD excluded)	8.74	9.02	9.36
<i>Most negative score (in brackets: AfD excluded)</i>			
CDU/CSU	3.00	3.45	2.26 (4.39)
SPD	4.72	3.66 (3.92)	2.04 (5.77)
FDP	3.08	3.67	2.41 (4.50)
Greens	4.79	4.29 (4.35)	1.56 (5.97)
Left	3.67	3.26	2.18 (5.14)
AfD	-	3.76	3.77
Average across parties	3.85	3.67	2.37
Average across parties (AfD excluded)	3.85	3.73	5.15
<i>Difference between most positive and most negative score (in brackets: AfD excluded)</i>			
CDU/CSU	5.89	5.84	7.45 (5.32)
SPD	3.61	5.24 (4.98)	7.30 (3.75)
FDP	5.61	4.67	6.76 (4.67)
Greens	4.15	4.86 (4.80)	7.80 (3.39)
Left	5.20	6.16	7.05 (4.09)
AfD	-	5.02	4.83
Average across parties	4.89	5.30	6.86
Average across parties (AfD voters excluded)	4.89	5.35	7.27
Average across parties (AfD + AfD voters excluded)	4.89	5.29	4.24

*Note:* Index of affective polarization based on eleven-point thermometer scales (range 1–11; CSU for Bavarian respondents, CDU for others), calculated according to the formula by Reiljan (2019), but based on vote choices instead of partisanship (second votes, small parties excluded from base for vote share calculation); data are weighted by region and demographics.

*Sources:* CrossSec09\_Cum, CrossSec13\_Cum, CrossSec17\_Cum.



The index values displayed in Table 15.2 suggest that the overall intensity of affective polarization among voters was somewhat lower than among the committed partisans studied by Reiljan (2019: 11). On the other hand, it was by no means negligible. In longitudinal perspective, however, the data signal little variability across elections and no linear increase from 2009 to 2017.

Yet, more fine-grained data again show more than meets the eye when looking only at the global index. It is hardly surprising that the thermometer scores given by voters to the parties they chose were invariably the most positive ones. More interestingly, from election to election, most parties were liked better by their respective electorates. The exception is the AfD which departs from this picture in two ways. Its voters were always on average less enthusiastic about their party than the supporters of all other parties, and there was no increase over time. Particularly revealing are the data on the most negative evaluations and the differences between the most positive and most negative evaluations, which can be interpreted as measures of the affective distances between parties. They uncover further aspects that render the status of the AfD special within the German party system. At the 2013 election, only for two voter groups the AfD was the least liked and thus emotionally most distant party: supporters of the SPD and the Greens. By 2017, the picture was completely different. Now the AfD was most strongly disliked by the voters of all established parties, and its scores were also much lower than the most negative ones given to any party at previous elections. Together, these data indicate a gap that widened constantly from election to election—rather modestly between 2009 and 2013 but dramatically from 2013 to 2017. AfD voters themselves appear peculiar, however, since especially in 2017 their affective distance from the party they liked least was considerably smaller than was the case for all other parties' voters. Another interesting piece of evidence can be obtained by omitting the AfD from the calculations (by excluding AfD voters and evaluations of the AfD if this party was the least liked one). This counterfactual restriction of the analysis to the traditional parties leads to a picture of affective polarization that was not increasing but indeed decreasing over time.

These observations illustrate that both the ideological polarization and the affective polarization of the German party system increased between the 2009 and 2017 elections, although overall only slightly, and thus below or at the edge of the sensitivity levels of the global aggregate indices. The driver of this development was the emergence and ideological radicalization of the AfD. This triggered a process of party system segmentation that was not yet apparent in 2013 but came fully to the fore in 2017. At this election, both faces of party system polarization displayed a similar, distinct structure. Its defining feature is an antagonism between all established parties on the one hand and the AfD on the other. In terms of ideological polarization, this dual pattern takes the form of a rather densely spaced cluster of established parties, ranging from the far left to the center-right, and the AfD, occupying a remote position on the far right. The development of affective

polarization was characterized by moves of the voters of the Left, Greens, SPD, FDP, and CDU/CSU closer to one another, and away from the AfD. At the 2017 federal election, this party occupied an isolated position whose emotional distance to all established parties' voters was larger than it had been for any pair of parties in 2009 or even 2013. Together, these findings suggest that the AfD's determined move to the right since 2015 initiated assimilation-contrast dynamics (Bless and Schwarz 1998) on the part of supporters of the established parties. They underline the results of Chapter 6 about the lack of availability of other parties' voters for the AfD but suggest that this constellation was not fully reciprocated by the AfD's voters. Perhaps, given the right circumstances and above all intelligent strategies that distinguish between AfD elites and voters and imply neither policy mimicking nor undifferentiated demonization on the part of established parties (Meguid 2007), these voters are not lost for good.

### Precarious Government

The progressive fragmentation and polarization of the German party system, which intensified after 2005, adds considerable complexity to the electoral process. When even the customary distinction between large and small parties appears increasingly meaningless (Poguntke 2014) and voters no longer grant sufficient majorities to the traditional, ideologically consistent bipolar alternatives of "black-yellow" (CDU/CSU-FDP) and "red-green" (SPD-Greens) two-party alliances, the formation of governments becomes more and more difficult (Dalton 2018: 230–1). Coalition taboos concerning the AfD and the Left (at the federal level) raise additional hurdles, especially when voters grant these parties strong parliamentary presences. New, more complex scenarios of governmental cooperation beyond the long-established models need to be developed. This requires parties to think outside the box—and provide adequate rationales to their voters in order not to alienate them. Beyond that, inevitably rising intra-governmental conflict potentials and rising transaction costs of cooperation will render the emerging governments' capacity to function smoothly, act decisively, and remain stable precarious (Kropp 2010). This, in turn, might resonate negatively with voters.

A look at government formations in the German states gives an impression of what this means. As second-order elections, in which less is at stake (Reif and Schmitt 1980), state elections have always made it easier for voters to deviate from customary patterns of choice and experiment with their votes. As a consequence, the rising complexity of the party system manifested itself in the states earlier and more massively (Niedermayer 2012). At the same time, since many areas of policy are outside the states' remit, the conflict potential between parties is lower and they find it easier to cooperate. State governments have therefore repeatedly served as testbeds for innovative party cooperations that later on were also adopted at the

federal level. In recent years, this led to a wide proliferation of different kinds of governments.

During the 1980s, the world of state governments had still been very clearly structured (Table 15.3). Almost two out of three governments were in the hands of just one party. Most others consisted of coalitions of two ideologically connected parties, corresponding to the established formulas of federal governments. After the creation of the five new East German states in 1990, the situation changed. This had to do with the emergence but also considerable electoral strength of the East German newcomer to the party system, the PDS (later the Left), which was at first considered unacceptable as a coalition partner. From then on, single-party governments became less common, whereas coalition governments of two parties from the same side, but increasingly also from opposite sides of the left–right spectrum (Spier 2010), became more frequent. During the same decade, the first coalitions emerged that included three partners and crossed the ideological divide. After 2000, single-party governments rapidly turned into infrequent minority phenomena whereas ideologically congenial two-party coalitions became the modal category.

In the second decade of the new millennium, the situation shifted to yet another degree of complexity. Single-party governments now became truly exceptional, whereas the rest consisted of (ideologically consistent) intra- and (inconsistent) inter-camp coalitions to almost equal shares. Grand Coalitions are a special case of the latter. They first appeared in the 1990s (Kropp 2010). Straddling the ideological divide and coupling the party system's main antagonists in a joint government, they are typically not sought for by any of the participants and created more out of necessity than desire, when no alternative appears feasible (Müller 2008; Spier 2015). Nonetheless, their share increased sharply to about one out of four state governments during the following decade. After a more hesitant start, the number of three-party coalitions also expanded greatly, ultimately amounting to about one out of five governments and including cases in which even a Grand Coalition needed support from a third party to reach a majority in its state's parliament. The traditional bipolar ideological camp logic thus appears to have lost its hold on parties' coalition considerations.

As a result of the AfD's growing popularity in the East, government formation became even harder at the most recent East German state elections. The Thuringian election of October 2019 provides telling anecdotal evidence of the electoral quagmires that may loom under conditions of intensifying fragmentation but also polarization and segmentation of the party system (Oppelland 2020). This election was the first at which, following vote gains of the Left and especially the AfD, not even CDU, SPD, FDP, and Greens together would have reached a parliamentary majority. An attempt to continue the previous left-of-center coalition of Left, SPD, and Greens at least as a minority government on the basis of a relative majority of parliamentary votes failed spectacularly when—in a stunningly

**Table 15.3** Composition of state governments, 1980–2020

	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
<b>Single-party governments:</b>				
CDU or CSU	15	10	8	2
SPD	11	14	1	1
FDP				1
<b>Intra-block coalitions:</b>				
CDU or CSU and FDP	9	9	8	7
CDU, FDP, and PRO			1	
CSU and FW				1
SPD and Greens	1	10	5	11
SPD, Greens, and SSW				1
SPD and Left		1	3	3
SPD, Left, and Greens				4
<b>Inter-block coalitions:</b>				
Grand Coalition		9	10	13
CDU and Greens			1	4
SPD and FDP	5	3	1	
SPD, Greens, and FDP		2		1
CDU, FDP, and Greens				2
Grand Coalition and Greens			1	2
Single-party governments (%)	63.4	41.4	23.1	7.5
Intra-block coalitions (%)	24.4	34.5	43.6	50.9
Inter-block coalitions (%)	12.2	24.1	33.3	41.5
(Pure) Grand Coalitions (%)	0.0	15.5	25.6	24.5
Coalitions of three parties (%)	0.0	3.4	5.1	18.9
Total (N)	41	58	39	53

Notes: Units are Cabinets.

Source: Own calculations based on [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landesregierung\\_\(Deutschland\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landesregierung_(Deutschland)).

surprising turn of events—a counter candidate of the FDP was elected head of the state government with one parliamentary vote more than the previous incumbent of the Left. As a result, for the first time, the FDP assumed the position of a head of government, which was all the more bizarre since the party had gained just seventy-five votes more than necessary to pass the 5 percent threshold and commanded only five seats in parliament. The CDU's MPs openly supported this candidate to express their rejection of the planned leftist government but that he won was due to votes from the AfD—which had also nominated a candidate of its own but obviously only to deceive the other parties because he received not a single vote.

After massive public criticism and pressure from national party leaders (including his own), which deemed a government grace of the AfD unacceptable, the new head of government stepped down after a few days without attempting to form a government (which is why this episode is counted as single-party government

of the FDP in Table 15.3). In the end, the Christian Democrats helped to install the initially planned minority government of the three leftist parties, in exchange for their commitment to seek new elections within a year. Of course, when called to the polls again, voters can be expected to take their recent experiences into account, thus creating a feedback loop from the parties' parliamentary maneuvering to the electorate's choices at the next election. Whether its outcome will render government formation any easier is impossible to tell but does not appear likely. What the events witnessed by voters will certainly not produce is more trust in the functioning of the democratic process. Given that lacking support for the democratic system is an important ingredient of voting for the AfD (Schmitt-Beck et al. 2017), the party's obstruction of unwritten rules of fair play in parliament might thus in the end be even rewarded at the polls.

State politics has often foreshadowed processes later reaching the federal level as well. As outlined in Chapter 1, at the 2005 federal election, a Grand Coalition appeared as the only feasible way to form a viable government. Whereas in 2009, the seat distribution for once enabled the CDU/CSU and FDP to reactivate the traditional model of a "black–yellow" coalition, parliamentary seat shares yet again allowed for neither this nor the alternative "red–green" option at the two subsequent elections. Both yet again led to Grand Coalitions. From the perspective of electoral accountability, Grand Coalitions are not desirable because they tend to undercut the competition by blurring the alternatives. They also weaken the parliamentary opposition, especially if they command a large majority, as was the case in 2013, although due to the Christian Democrats' and Social Democrats' massive vote losses not any more in 2017. Moreover, they tend to undermine the respective junior partner's electoral prospects to the advantage of the senior partner because voters tend to attribute the successes of governments to the parties of the respective heads of government (Debus et al. 2013). The weakness of the SPD since 2009 may in part have resulted from these dynamics.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2017 election, fear of yet another such outcome of their joining a Grand Coalition indeed motivated the Social Democrats to entrench themselves in a stance of strict rejection of any further collaboration with the Christian Democrats. The only conceivable alternative was therefore a three-party coalition. Such a scenario, although during the past decade not uncommon in the states (Table 15.3), had never been seriously considered at the national level. After the 2017 federal election, for the first time, an effort was undertaken to assess the feasibility of a coalition between CDU/CSU, FDP, and Greens. However, in the end, no agreement could be accomplished, and all eyes were therefore yet again on the Social Democrats. This time, they complied and for the fourth time joined a Grand Coalition under the leadership of the Christian Democrats (Blinzler et al. 2019).

However, even though it thus led to yet another reiteration of a meanwhile established model for organizing the federal government, the 2017 election was unique.

For the first time in the country's post-war history, it appeared seriously doubtful whether the federal parliament would be able to fulfill its crucial electoral function of creating a new government (Bagehot 2001). For almost six months, and thus exactly twice as long as during the hitherto most complicated process of government formation (which had followed the previous election), Germany and its international partners had to get by with a caretaker government without the ability and mandate to act on important issues and the lingering fear that a new election might need to be called to leave it to the electorate to cut the Gordian knot that it had laced in the first place (Siefken 2018; Bräuninger et al. 2019; Linhart and Switek 2019). After the government had finally set to work, the tension hardly eased, and the possibility of premature cessation of the coalition was always in the air. Bitter struggles over immigration policy called the decades-old cooperation between CDU and CSU into question, and the SPD's internal debates about whether to continue or abandon the coalition never ceased—at least until the arrival of SARS-CoV-2.

### Hazy Prospects

There is no magic crystal ball that allows us to gaze into the future, and even educated guessing is difficult with so many parameters of coming elections not fixed but variable. With progressing globalization, German voters find themselves more and more exposed to the challenging conditions of today's "VUCA world" (Mack and Khare 2016), in which parties' ability to steer clear courses in line with their manifestos is more and more constricted by events and developments outside their control (Sassen 1996; Hellwig 2015; Vowles and Xezonakis 2016). But through their behavior, voters also contribute their own fair share to the "Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity" of contemporary politics. Over the last federal elections, they have brought about a massive transformation of the party system. The erstwhile highly concentrated party system, in which competition revolved around two mainstream "people's parties" that aggregated the preferences of the vast majority of voters, has mutated into a six-party system. Three years after the last federal election, only one party—the CDU/CSU—still stands out as clearly stronger than the others, but even that only with a share of the electorate that is a far cry from what it scored in its heyday.

The situational context of the next elections cannot be known yet, but voters' greater sensitivity to these circumstances can be taken as a given. At some subliminal level, how voters relate to the parties seems to be changing. Arguably, a subtle shift from expressive to more instrumental electoral behavior is underway (Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Mair 2013). As traditional cleavage politics turns into a distant echo from the past, voters appear less inclined to support parties for their own sake, drawing reward from the mere act of displaying their partisan

identities. Instead, they appear more sensitive to the parties' policies. In particular, they seem to have become more impatient with parties pursuing courses of action they dislike. While voters "began to choose" already decades ago (Rose and McAllister 1986), their behavior at the most recent elections suggests that they have become less tolerant over time with what they perceive as policy aberrations and failures to perform on the part of parties. To some extent, partisan identities seem to have given way to an understanding of parties as political service agencies that are easily abandoned if they do not deliver.

At the same time, parties—pressured to respond to developments outside their control and forced to engage in complex, multi-layered, and apparently "messy" processes of negotiating and bargaining (often semantically vilified by journalists as "bickering")—encounter increasing difficulties to offer policies that appear consistent, efficient, easy to comprehend, and visibly in line with voters' preferences. Accordingly, the likelihood of voter dissatisfaction is systematically rising (Dalton 2004: 128–54; Stoker 2017). On the part of voters, diminishing deference to authorities and recourse to elite-challenging behavior is no longer primarily a domain of leftist-libertarian "critical citizens" (Norris 2011; Campbell 2019). Protest politics has become more ubiquitous (Giugni and Grasso 2019). Its complement in institutionalized participation is electoral behavior characterized by a rising readiness to desert parties and shift to others, thus turning one's back on previous suppliers of policy if they are found wanting, in order to try out others.

Each of the three federal elections since 2009 was overshadowed by a massive crisis, and the analyses presented in this book have shown how they shook up voters' decision-making. As the first election after the end of the Christian Democratic–Social Democratic duopoly is coming up in fall 2021, the next major crisis is already well underway, and it will probably entail more far-reaching long-term consequences than any of its precursors. How the COVID-19 pandemic will play out electorally is highly uncertain. In Germany, the public health challenge of the outbreak was, to date, better under control than in most other Western democracies (Yuan et al. 2020), and federal and state governments swiftly enacted wide-ranging measures to ease immediate economic hardship on the part of businesses and employees (Elgin et al. 2020). Public controversies arose mainly about the extent to which the state legitimately could restrict its citizens' civil liberties. Arguably, in terms of policy conflicts, this crisis initially related more strongly to the socio-cultural than the socio-economic dimension.

However, as the material fallout of the months-long domestic lockdown and the worldwide economic downturn will make itself more strongly felt, this may change. By the time of the next election, rising unemployment and a stumbling economy may well have shifted issue emphasis back from the hitherto dominant socio-cultural dimension to socio-economic "bread and butter" concerns. The last decade's salience-induced electoral realignment was arguably more strongly driven by value-based identity conflicts than by interest conflicts between clear-cut

social groups (Norris and Inglehart 2019). If that is true, the new conflict constellation may turn out to be more responsive to current politics and policies than the institutionalized cleavages originating from the beginnings of democratic mass politics (Dalton 2018: 228–31). As a consequence, the pendulum might swing back, away from the parties advantaged by the salience of cultural conflict—the AfD and the Greens. In recent polls, these two parties already appear weakened (Figure 15.1). It seems not completely out of the question that a significant part of the AfD's greatly increased electorate could be nudged back to one of the established parties.

Partisanship has declined in Germany, but it has not disappeared for good. About six out of ten voters still feel attached to a party, although not necessarily strongly. Such identities have traditionally been seen as an anchor and restraint of electoral behavior that—through the “normal vote” mechanism (Converse 1966)—defines a corridor within which election results fluctuate when conditions are not too far out of the ordinary. This mechanism has not simply vanished. As shown in this book, the activation of partisans is still the dominant process during election campaigns. Partisans have also been found to be less responsive to the situational aspects of elections. This observation needs to be qualified, however, since partisans nowadays appear to defect more easily from straight in-party voting to ideologically adjacent parties, and that renders normal votes somewhat less likely. Moreover, we have also seen that the ways parties deal with major crises—of which yet another one will in all likelihood dominate the next election's agenda—may undermine some of their partisans' attachments, and this entails more profound long-term implications for electoral behavior.

At the next federal election, one important factor will also be turned into a variable that has been a constant at all three elections on which this volume focused. The incumbent chancellor Angela Merkel has vowed not to run again. Candidate effects have occasionally been very strong at federal elections, and during Merkel's long incumbency, the Christian Democrats always profited strongly from their leader's constantly high popularity (Hansen and Olsen 2020). Whether her successor will deliver his (there are several aspirants, all of them male) party the same advantage remains to be seen, but it is certainly not preordained. Given the changed strength relationships between the parties, it is open which of them will nominate candidates for the chancellorship and as a consequence also whether and in which format those competing for the chancellorship will have the chance to present themselves to voters during a televised debate. These broadcasts have regularly garnered larger audiences than any other campaign event, and the analysis presented above has shown that they in principle may move party preferences, depending on the participants' perceived performance. However, the increasingly fragmented party system no longer suits their basic logic as a “duel” of two evident competitors for the chancellorship. How parties and broadcasters will cope with these changing conditions remains to be seen.



As regards TV news and the press, it does not appear likely that they become more openly one-sided in their coverage, in particular not across all the many outlets which together compose the still dominant traditional pillars of the German media system. Mutual cancellation of differently valenced messages can be expected to remain a core characteristic of media-induced persuasion, thus delimiting its net impact (Zaller 1996). What creates uncertainty, however, is the strengthening role of online media. Their audience is growing at the expense of traditional news outlets (Staudt and Schmitt-Beck 2019). Moreover, the parties, with the AfD as *avant-garde*, are increasingly setting up their own more or less professional online facilities for direct information provision that circumvent the news media's editorial filters. Against the background of the increasing polarization of the party system, these developments open up the possibility of a segmentation of the media audience and the retreat of certain parties' supporters into digital echo chambers (Pickel 2019: 171). Such a development might further strengthen the polarization of the party system (Dvir-Gvirsman 2016).

Coalition politics is bound to become even more complicated than in the past. The parties will need to reflect on innovative scenarios for government formation that may involve straddling the ideological divide, shedding taboos, including more than two partners, or ways to create a workable minority government. These are not only challenges of post-election bargaining. Coalition preferences are an important ingredient of vote choices, but parties will have strong incentives to remain ambiguous and circumvent coalition questions in their campaigns. This might undermine the instrumental value of coalition preferences for electoral choices and render expressively motivated coalition preferences pointless, thus frustrating an electorate socialized into expecting clear coalition statements from its parties. Ultimately, moreover, the new complexity of coalition politics might also contribute to voter alienation by further blurring governmental accountability.

The one thing that is certain, however, is that no terminal station is in sight for the roller-coaster of German electoral politics. This does not preclude future election results that resemble the more concentrated ones of the past. However, as proven by the 2013 federal election, in which this was last the case, such outcomes do not signal a return to a latent equilibrium. They only show that high electoral volatility does not always lead to more fragmentation. It may also reduce it—albeit only temporarily.

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