



Introduction

A *Zeitenwende* Indeed

Eric Langenbacher

With Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the new coalition government's resulting reorientation of German foreign and security policy—an epochal shift that jettisoned 30, even 50 years of policy—the world immediately changed. The consequences and spillover effects of this paradigm shift or *Zeitenwende* will take years to become truly apparent and will rightfully seize the attention of academics, pundits, and policy analysts. Nevertheless, we should also not neglect other events from the recent past, namely, the most important election in the world in 2021. The September election for the German Bundestag was the most eventful, surprising, and momentous in that country for almost two decades, with an outcome that has already greatly affected Germany, Europe, and the world. It was also a novel election and outcome in several ways: it was the first election

Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary German Politics and Policy

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<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/LangenbacherShifting>

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since 1953 without an incumbent chancellor running for re-election, and it resulted in the first three-party coalition government in over half a century.¹

The banner headlines highlighted several key developments: the end of the Merkel era and the related ousting of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU, or Union) from power after 16 years; the surprising recovery of the Social Democrats (SPD), now leading a “traffic light” coalition, composed of the SPD, Greens, and Free Democrats (FDP), under Chancellor Olaf Scholz; the further fragmentation of the party system and decline of traditional catch-all parties; and, thanks to overhanging and compensatory mandates, the largest parliament ever (and the second-largest in the world after China) with 736 members. Most importantly, the results showed that campaigns, candidates, and unexpected events matter immensely. Indeed, the election turned out very differently than almost all analysts expected at the beginning of the year and even in the early summer.

The State of Play as Election Year Commenced

Almost immediately after the latest grand coalition government was inaugurated—nearly five months after the 24 September 2017 Bundestag election—the transition to the post-Merkel era began. Angela Merkel herself was a reluctant chancellor for her last term. Conscious of “Merkel fatigue” among the electorate and wanting to retire before becoming a “half-dead wreck,”² it was widely reported that she did not even want to stand for office in 2017. She decided to do so only out of a sense of duty to counteract the right-populist presidency of Donald Trump in the U.S. and perhaps because of a perceived dearth of able successors.³ Then, after several poor Union results in state elections—in Bavaria and particularly Hesse—Merkel announced in late 2018 that she was not going to run again and stepped down as CDU leader.

In December 2018, the party selected her preferred replacement, centrist Saarland Minister-President Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, in a tight three-way race (the first such competitive selection process ever for the Christian Democrats) over Jens Spahn, the sitting health minister and old Merkel rival, and the more conservative Friedrich Merz. Kramp-Karrenbauer, who became defense minister in July 2019 when Ursula von der Leyen went to Brussels to run the European Commission, had a difficult time uniting the various wings of the party. The CDU has faced both a strategic dilemma, namely, whether to continue Merkel’s more centrist course or to tack to the right, and a tactical challenge about how to deal with the right-wing populist Alternative for

Germany (AfD), especially in eastern Germany. It was this latter challenge that led Kramp-Karrenbauer to resign in February 2020 due to the scandal over the CDU informally collaborating with the AfD to install a Free Democratic minister-president in the eastern state of Thuringia (who was ousted after 28 days, incidentally)—despite her expressly forbidding this.⁴ In early 2021, after lengthy pandemic-induced delays, the party went with Armin Laschet, the equally centrist Merkel-supporting minister-president of the large western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, over Merz (again) and foreign policy specialist Norbert Röttgen. After another heated discussion, Laschet was also chosen in April 2021 to be the chancellor candidate for the combined CDU/CSU, this time over Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder.

As the election year commenced, the SPD was seemingly in a sorry state. It had been polling well below its already dismal 20 percent of the 2017 vote, hovering at 14–17 percent for several years.⁵ Since mid-2018, the Greens had even replaced it as the most popular party on the left. Like the CDU, the SPD has long been riven by a divide between more progressive leftists and more centrist pragmatists. Its support had taken a hit among leftist voters and never really recovered after it implemented the neoliberal Hartz IV/Agenda 2010 reforms under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the early 2000s. Moreover, it was unable to renew itself in opposition: in the 24 years since its big victory over Helmut Kohl in 1998, it has not been in government for only 4 years (2009–2013) and was the junior coalition partner to Merkel's CDU/CSU for 12 of her 16 years in power. All of the necessary trade-offs and deviations from ideological purity that governing entails negatively affected the party and its profile.

The SPD went through several leaders after Martin Schulz resigned in early 2018, following its lackluster performance in the 2017 election. First was Andrea Nahles, a critic of Schröder's neoliberal policies and a former minister of labor and social affairs. She stepped down in June 2019 after horrible polling and a big loss in the elections for the European Parliament the previous month, although in 2022 she became the first woman to head the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit). After several interim leaders, the SPD implemented a new dual leadership model with a man and a woman, as well as a new selection method consisting of a vote of the party membership in late 2019. Beating the candidacy of prominent moderate and sitting Finance Minister Olaf Scholz and easterner Klara Geywitz, the little-known and more leftist leadership duo of Saskia Esken, an IT expert, and Norbert Walter-Borjans, a former finance minister in North Rhine-Westphalia, was selected. Suffice it to say that they did not really become better known afterward, maintaining a rather low public profile throughout 2020

and 2021. The most controversy occurred when several individuals accused Esken of slander after she referred to anti-maskers as “Covidiot” in mid-2020.⁶ But, internally, the leaders were able to manage ideological fissures and partially placate the leftist base, including rising democratic socialist and former youth leader Kevin Kühnert. Finally, the SPD made an unprecedented and perhaps prescient decision to select Scholz as its chancellor candidate very early in August 2020.

As for the smaller parties, the Greens seemed well positioned as the campaign heated up. They had surged to over 20 percent in the polls at times after 2018 under pragmatic, “realo,” and relatively young co-leaders Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck. At one point in July 2019 and May 2021, they were actually polling first. Many have noted that the Greens could be supplanting the SPD as the main catch-all party of the left and center-left. Vastly increased consciousness and concern about the environment—especially among youth—is behind this strength, aided by the “Fridays for Future” protests since August 2018 and a series of summer droughts in 2018–2020. The party also seemed to gain momentum when it chose Baerbock to be its chancellor candidate in April 2021. At 40, she was the youngest candidate ever and only the second woman (after Merkel). This was also the first time that the Greens even named such a candidate because they were never within striking distance of the chancellery before.

The other small parties entered 2021 with less momentum. The classically liberal FDP had been polling under 10 percent for several years and for a while were even hovering around the dreaded 5 percent threshold to be eligible for seats in parliament. The trauma of missing this mark in 2013 and being absent for the subsequent parliamentary term was still quite raw. Still, the party has maintained its brand consistency with its policies of sound finances, deregulation, educational reform, and digitalization. Consistent leadership since 2013 under still youthful Christian Lindner (just forty-three in 2022) has helped, and by early 2021 the Liberals seemed to be gaining support, interestingly, also among younger voters.

The populist right-wing AfD—a disruptive and incendiary force since making it into the Bundestag in 2017 and gaining representation in all 16 state legislatures—had been riven by vicious internal fissures, party donation scandals,⁷ and (threats of) official surveillance from the authorities upholding the Constitution. The mainstream parties also did what they could to delegitimize the party, for instance, by repeatedly denying a vice-presidency of the Bundestag to AfD candidates. And it lost the salience of its signature issue, immigration, with just 4 percent of voters saying it was important in January 2021 versus 16 percent for the environment and 84 percent for the

coronavirus.⁸ Although its level of support was typically below the 12.6 percent it achieved in 2017, it did not collapse, as was the case with similar parties in past decades. The AfD seemed partially institutionalized in the system around 9–11 percent (more in the East).

Finally, the Left Party has been seemingly written off, having hovered around the 5 percent threshold, normally in the 6–7 percent range. Lackluster leaders, divisive politicians like hard-left Sarah Wagenknecht (who dabbled in vaccine skepticism), reinvigorated ideological competition from the SPD and the Greens, an aging eastern base, and the AfD competing successfully for the eastern identity or protest vote were all reasons behind this predicament.

The Campaign

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had marked consequences on support for the various parties. The ruling CDU/CSU had surged to nearly 40 percent by early summer 2020 (up from 25–30 percent over the legislative period), and smaller parties like the AfD and the FDP weakened. As the election year progressed, the CDU lost only a little support despite the internal cleavages unleashed by the contest over the chair in January 2021 and then over the chancellor candidacy in April. There were some potential warning signs, with the CDU having lost about 3 percent compared to the last elections in Baden-Württemberg and 4 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate in March, but this was momentarily obscured by gaining over 7 percent in the (small) eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt in June. The Greens retained strength despite some oscillations in the polls and did very well in the regional elections mentioned above.

By the early summer, the consensus was holding that the CDU/CSU would be the largest party—albeit with slightly lower support than in 2017. CDU leader and Union chancellor candidate Laschet would most likely be the next head of government. True, for a brief moment after her selection as the Greens' chancellor candidate in April, Baerbock was the frontrunner. Few, however, thought this was a sustainable lead, and indeed the Greens fell back a bit. Still, it was expected that they would come in second and that a Black-Green coalition would result—perhaps with the Liberals (FDP) in a three-way “Jamaica” coalition.⁹

Then, starting in late July, the CDU/CSU weakened considerably, polling 10 points below their 2017 result and much lower than their levels of support earlier in the year or at the height of the pandemic in 2020. The Greens also began to struggle, down about 5 percent from their peak. There

were numerous causes behind these developments. The CDU/CSU was still internally divided after the bruising personnel fights earlier in the year. It appeared that many had some “buyer’s remorse” over not going with Bavaria’s more conservative and charismatic Söder. The party may have suffered from pandemic fatigue—being blamed for the prolonged and imperfect fight against COVID-19. It did not help that the important state of North Rhine-Westphalia—of which Laschet was the unpopular minister-president (until October 2021)—had the highest infection rate in the country at the end of August. Horrible floods in mid-July had decimated many communities in that state and neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate. There was substantial criticism that the authorities failed both to alert the affected residents in time and to provide necessary assistance afterward. This is the bad luck of any incumbent.

Laschet and the CDU/CSU also ran a lackluster campaign, and their posters and television ads were widely mocked. For instance, a poster series depicting people with different occupations and the tag line “Making Germany Together” (*Deutschland gemeinsam machen*) used employees from the party headquarters. A television ad had a shot in a coal mine with Laschet the only member of a group with ash on his face, while another scene took place within the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which many thought was crass. Laschet also made some serious gaffes, for example, laughing in the background of an event for victims of the July floods. In fact, many voters pointed to this incident—“Laschet-Lacher” (Laschet’s laugh)—as the pivotal reason they stopped supporting him and his party. Increasingly desperate, the campaign brought out Merkel despite her reluctance to get involved. When a red-red-green coalition was a hypothetical possibility at one point, it resorted to employing “red scare” tactics reminiscent of the anti-communist “red socks” trope of the last century, warning voters that if the SPD were to lead the next government, it might bring the dreaded Left Party into a coalition.

Most importantly, voters had likely tired of the incumbent party, which had governed since 2005. There was indeed a desire for some change (*Aufbruchstimmung*), a mood that some of the opposition parties, especially the Greens, overestimated. And the CDU/CSU also likely suffered from the lack of the so-called Merkel bonus. On the one hand, this refers to the more general “chancellor bonus” or incumbency advantage that any sitting chancellor has. On the other, this refers to the specific bump in support that Merkel always gave her party, particularly among women voters, but also for many centrist and center-left voters who otherwise would have supported different parties. Indeed, Merkel remained the most popular politician throughout her years of power, although by December 2021 with a score of 2.1, Olaf Scholz ran a strong second to her 2.7.¹⁰

The Greens' decline was a little more mystifying. Many predicted that the increasing evidence of extreme weather and climate change in Germany and across the world would have strengthened this quintessential environmentalist party. Then again, all mainstream parties have thematized related issues so that the Greens no longer "own" this policy area as they once did. Baerbock also had a few missteps, such as plagiarism allegations about her campaign book and inaccuracies in her published cv.¹¹ This strengthened doubts about her lack of experience (only 8 years in the Bundestag) and some remorse that the more seasoned co-leader Robert Habeck (ten years her senior and a minister in Schleswig-Holstein for 6 years) was not chosen as chancellor candidate. The campaign slogan "Ready, because you are" (*Bereit, weil Ihr es seid*) was decently received—although *Der Spiegel* called it "optimistic chlorophyll" and noted how few images of Baerbock there were.¹² A television ad featuring a folk song with "greened" lyrics was widely mocked, especially by the party's key younger demographic.¹³ One might add that the Greens have a pattern of riding high in polls between elections (e.g., in 2011 and 2016) and then underperforming on election day. They also have a veritable tradition of campaign mishaps, such as warped eco-friendly posters, advocating a weekly "Veggie Day," and scandals over pedophilia.¹⁴ They may have dodged a bullet in 2021 when an obscure proposal to ban the construction of single-family homes did not gain more traction.¹⁵ The old reputation that the Greens are the *Verbotspartei* (the party of prohibition)—their advocacy of speed limits on the Autobahn, for instance—may have dented their appeal.¹⁶

The real story was the strengthening of the SPD. By August, it was polling 5–10 percent above its recent lows, a couple of points ahead of its dismal 2017 result, and eventually it polled as the strongest party. This was almost all due to the popularity of its chancellor candidate Scholz. His centrist or center-left reputation and his calm, reassuring, Merkel-like demeanor, along with his ability to negotiate and forge consensus, resonated. "Short, wiry and nearly bald, Scholz looks more like an accountant than a political star ... Yet in Germany, a country where even the TV news presenters look (and sound) like librarians, Scholz's low-key persona evokes trust."¹⁷

German voters also respected Scholz's substantial political experience, including being a member of the Bundestag (and chief whip of the SPD parliamentary group), the SPD's general secretary, the minister of labor and social affairs in Merkel's first grand coalition, first-mayor (governor) of Hamburg from 2011 to 2018, and then finance minister and vice-chancellor in Merkel's last government. Exhibiting the Teflon-like attributes of successful politicians, he has avoided fallout from various potential scandals: authorizing a policy that allowed Hamburg's police to administer emetics to suspected drug

dealers who swallowed their stash (leading to at least one death); failing to stop violent protesters at the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg; somehow being involved with the opaque “cum-ex” tax evasion affair that cost taxpayers millions;¹⁸ and, as finance minister, presiding over the collapse of Wirecard, an electronic payment processor, and a ministerial unit that failed to report evidence of wrongdoing to prosecutors. His ministry was even raided before the election, and there is a parliamentary committee of inquiry that could make his life difficult. Still, voters did not seem excessively bothered by any of this.

Moreover, Scholz and the SPD conducted an incredibly disciplined campaign. Unlike in previous years, the SPD ran a professional and effective operation with simple slogans like “Vote for a 12 Euro minimum wage” or “Competence for Germany” with the tag line “Scholz will tackle it” (*Scholz packt das an*). It may have been an astute move to have the more leftist Esken and Walter-Borjans as party leaders and the more moderate Scholz as chancellor candidate, allowing for outreach to both more leftist and more centrist voters. The early selection of Scholz in the summer of 2020 provided a head start that may have helped him gain traction and avoided any intra-party acrimony, and the related bad press, closer to the actual election date.

All this being said, there had been some volatility in the polls over the last few election cycles. On election day in 2017, for instance, both the CDU/CSU and SPD did several points worse than they were polling, and the AfD did quite a bit better. Even though that party was in the 10–12 percent range in the weeks before the 2021 election—a little below their 12.6 percent result in 2017—if the polls were similarly off again, it could have garnered 12–14 percent in 2021. Pollsters were keenly aware of the problems that occurred in 2017 (e.g., AfD voters may have been more reluctant to answer honestly, as with Trump voters), and issued many assurances that the data would be more accurate this time around.¹⁹ Still, given the essentially three-way tie between the Union, SPD, and Greens, the 2021 outcome would come down to the wire, and any last-minute shifts could be consequential.

The Election and the 20th Bundestag

On election day, 26 September 2021, the polls held, and the SPD won the election with 26 percent of the vote. This was over 5 percent better than its 2017 outcome, but 10 percent higher than it was polling four months previously. It appears that the party learned some lessons from previous defeats and that the stench of Hartz IV/Agenda 2010 has sufficiently worn off for the electorate. Greater outreach and attention devoted to working-class voters

paid dividends, and might even represent a model for other center-left/social democratic parties elsewhere. Mention should also be made of SPD victories in the states of Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, which had elections on the same day. The winning minister-presidents there—Franziska Giffey and Manuela Schwesig, respectively—are major forces in the next generation of leading SPD politicians. Giffey formed a new government in December, a continuation of the SPD-Greens-Left coalition, and Schwesig formed a coalition with the Left (ousting the CDU from power) in November. Incidentally, there were some irregularities with the elections in Berlin—such as missing or insufficient ballots, long lines, and some counting problems—caused or exacerbated by street closures due to the Berlin Marathon being held on the same day.²⁰ Mandated new elections in February 2023 resulted in a CDU victory. Even though the incumbent government could have continued, Giffey and the SPD decided to enter a grand coalition as junior partner to Kai Wegner’s CDU.²¹

The CDU/CSU garnered only 24 percent, almost 9 percent worse than 2017 and a far cry from the 40 percent support polls showed at the height of the pandemic a year previously. This was their worst outcome since the party’s establishment—even in 1949, Konrad Adenauer got 31 percent. Because German law does not automatically confer the right to try to form a government (*formateur*) on the leader of the largest parliamentary party, there was some feverish speculation in the days following the election that Laschet could actually end up chancellor of a mathematically possible Jamaica coalition (CDU/CSU-Greens-FDP). This was always highly unlikely, and denying the SPD the ability to lead a government would have been seen as a deep, even scandalous, violation of political norms.

Laschet fell pretty rapidly into political oblivion. On 7 October, he announced his resignation as party leader (made official in January 2022), and on 25 October, he stepped down as minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia as previously promised. He was elected from the state list to sit in the Bundestag, but he has not distinguished himself except for a passionate speech in July 2023 denouncing the AfD.²² Given his long record of public service at the state, European, and national levels, it is a little unfortunate that he will be remembered as the shortest-serving CDU leader of all time and a nice, stolid, but gaffe-prone politico. In addition to the laughing incident, his ballot was incorrectly folded on election day, and his choices were publicly photographed, causing some speculation that his vote would not be counted.²³ A lingering image will be the *Spiegel* cover from April 2021 in which he is portrayed as the hapless chieftain from the Asterix comic books.²⁴

The Greens came in third with 15 percent—almost 6 percent more than their 2017 result. Even though this was their best-ever national result, it was

nevertheless considered a bit of a disappointment after their recent polling highs and the current salience of environmental and climate issues. Much of the blame lies with Baerbock, whose relative inexperience showed. Habeck, a loyal supporter during the campaign, emerged as the powerful *Realpolitiker* of the party. It has also been pointed out that the Greens had never fielded a chancellor candidate before—nor were they ever so close to the top job. This inexperience may have resulted in a sub-optimal campaign.

The FDP followed with 11.5 percent—not even a percent more than the last election. Still, because they had been hovering just above the 5 percent threshold a year earlier, this was interpreted as a major win. Lindner took a lot of this momentum into coalition negotiations, knowing also that he had some leverage as the FDP would be a crucial component of any governing combination (with the exception of another grand coalition, which about 0 percent of Germans wanted). Interestingly, both the Greens and the FDP did very well among younger voters. In the eighteen to twenty-four age group, the Greens won the largest share at 23 percent, but the FDP was nipping at their heels with 21 percent. The Union parties and SPD won the largest share of the older groups—60 percent of those sixty to sixty-nine versus 25 percent of the eighteen to twenty-four group.²⁵

The AfD lost over 2 percent, coming in at 10 percent. Many breathed a sigh of relief, but it also showed that the party—despite all of the drama—will not vanish so quickly as the Republikaner (REP) and the German People's Union (DVU) had done before. Moreover, the AfD is worryingly entrenched in eastern Germany, where it won 16 direct mandates in three states (versus 3 just in Saxony in 2017). It was the most popular party in both Saxony and Thuringia, and was second in Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, and overall in the East. Its revenue stream from the pool of state funding is assured, and its Desiderius Erasmus political foundation will likely get a tranche. Others will continue to try to ostracize the party, but no one has a clear idea of what should be done. Perhaps ongoing and even intensified scrutiny from the constitutional authorities will finally have an impact. The party's cynicism cannot be underestimated: they toyed with anti-vax sentiment and other forms of opposition to the government's pandemic response. Who knows what will happen if their signature issue—migration/integration—gains renewed salience. The world is not becoming more stable, and Germany is not becoming less diverse. Several agencies have estimated that the country needs many more migrants, as many as 400,000 per year, in order to maintain its economy.²⁶ Indeed, just months after the election, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees entered the country, amounting to just over a million by summer 2023.²⁷

Table 0.1: The 2021 Bundestag Election Results

Party	Second Vote %	% Change from 2017	West	East	Total Seats
SPD	25.7	+5.2	26.4	24.2	206
CDU/CSU	24.1	-8.8	25.9	16.9	197
Greens	14.8	+5.9	15.4	10.9	118
FDP	11.5	+0.8	12.0	9.7	92
AfD	10.3	-2.3	8.2	19.1	83
Left	4.9	-4.3	3.6	10.0	39
Other	8.7	+3.5	8.5	9.2	1*
Overall					736

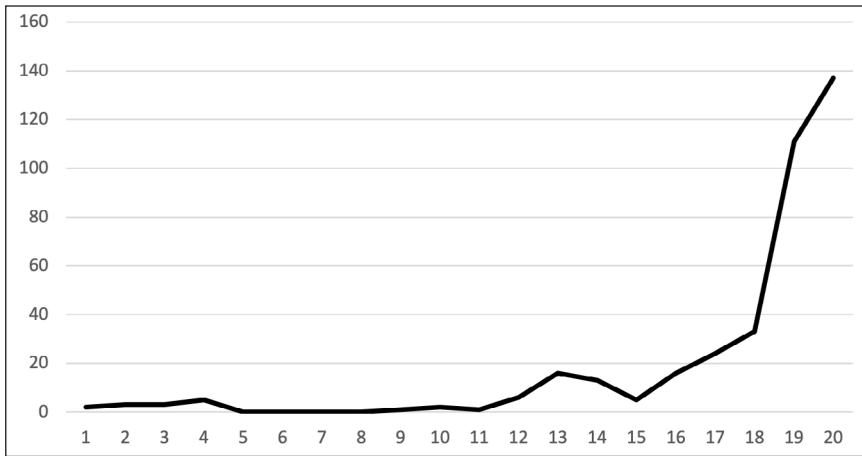
* The South Schleswig Voters Association (Südschleswigscher Wählerverband, ssw) received one seat from the state of Schleswig-Holstein under special provisions for this ethnic Dane minority party.

Source: Bundeswahlleiter, <https://de.statista.com/infografik/25874/zweitstimmenanteil-der-parteien-bei-der-bundestagswahl-2021-in-ost-und-westdeutschland/>.

Finally, the Left garnered only 4.9 percent of the vote, almost halving their 2017 result. Even though they failed to reach the 5 percent threshold—like their precursor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), in 1994—they utilized a caveat in the election law to gain representation. Because the party won three direct mandates, it is entitled to a corresponding share of list seats based on its second vote total.²⁸ The challenges facing the Left are multiple and daunting. Nevertheless, they could possibly recover if the Greens and SPD are tainted by governing, the AfD weakens in the East, and new, charismatic leaders emerge.

Overall, this was a clear victory for the Social Democrats, made possible by a good candidate, smart strategy, and the unprecedented openness of the race. This was the first election since 1949 in which an incumbent chancellor was not running. Moreover, the vast majority of the German electorate could be persuaded to vote for any of the four mainstream parties, producing a degree of fluidity not seen for decades.²⁹ Although some analysts have decried rising polarization in German politics, the strength and fundamental agreement among the four mainstream parties belies this thesis. In fact, in 2021 only 15.2 percent of voters overall voted for populist right- and left-wing parties, down from nearly 22 percent in 2017. It is potentially concerning that despite the choice of six parliamentary parties with diverse platforms, almost 9 percent of voters—higher among younger voters—still chose another

Figure 0.1: Overhanging and Compensatory Mandates by Electoral Period



option. The East-West difference is also quite marked. It is not just that the AfD and the Left Party have double the support in the East compared to the West (and almost 30 percent of the combined eastern vote), but that the new coalition government does not command a majority there. The abysmal performance of the CDU (19 percent) in that region is particularly salient (but might also show that there is space for a more conservative CDU to recover). This persistent cleavage between East and West shows no signs of going away, even after 30-plus years of unity. National policymakers still seem at a loss regarding what could or should be done about it.

The 20th Bundestag is the largest ever with 736 seats. Above the 598 legal minimum, there were 138 overhanging and compensatory mandates, a result of changes to the electoral law put in place for the 2013 election in response to Constitutional Court rulings. The number of such seats has skyrocketed in recent cycles. Overhanging mandates began to increase noticeably after reunification (12th Bundestag) and to accelerate around the turn of the century (15th Bundestag)—a consequence of more parties gaining representation and the concomitant fall in the vote share of the two catch-all parties (often referred to as “elephants”), which sank to 53.4 percent in 2017 and 49.8 in 2021. Vote splitting, that is, voters choosing different parties for their first and second votes, has increased markedly in recent cycles. When the first and second vote totals were more aligned, overhanging mandates were rare. Most generally, over time, the competing logic of the two partial electoral systems—two parties dominating the direct mandates selected by single-member

plurality and rising multi-party dynamics from the proportional representation (PR) component—started to create real tensions, disparities, and more disproportionality (i.e., less voter-seat correspondence).

In any case the “XXL Bundestag” is well above a rule of thumb for the ideal size of a parliament—the cube root of the population, that is, 436 members. There are also challenges finding office space (despite new buildings)³⁰ and configuring the *Plenarsaal* (plenary hall) and committee rooms for so many deputies. Although it is an argument that some populists misuse, it is germane to mention that the costs to the taxpayer of such a parliament will exceed 1 billion Euros in 2022.³¹ I suppose this is a decent deal: the 705 members of the European Parliament cost 2 billion Euros in 2021.³²

One source of disproportionality in recent cycles has come from the “other” share of the vote—as high as 15.7 percent in 2013 and still 8.7 percent in 2021. The so-called Free Voters (Freie Wähler) are one of the biggest groupings in this category.³³ Especially strong in Bavaria (where they are in a coalition with the CSU in the state parliament) and elsewhere in the South, they take a hyperlocal and conservative-libertarian approach to politics, supporting more direct democracy and the legalization of marijuana, and opposing joint European debt. All of this being said, the German system has been rather proportional overall. Looking at the percent reduction in the effective number of parties, the German system has always been below the international baseline (16.5 percent) with the exception of the anomalous 2013 result, when both the FDP and AfD narrowly missed the 5 percent threshold, “artificially” boosting the share of seats of the four parties that did gain representation.³⁴

For all of these reasons, there has been recent discussion about yet another set of changes to the electoral system that would reduce the number

Table 0.2: Percent Reduction in the Effective Number of Parties

Year	Percent Reduction
1990	12.14
1994	7.32
1998	11.59
2002	12.77
2005	8.51
2009	13.51
2013	25.33
2017	8.48
2021	12.95

of members, but would also maintain proportionality (and thus constitutionality). Parties, as always, are also pursuing their self-interest. Several then opposition parties (Greens, Left, and FDP) introduced a proposal in late 2019 to reduce the number of constituencies to 250 and to increase the number of list seats to 380 (about 60 percent of the total), obviating the need for compensatory mandates. The grand coalition parties slow-walked this idea—although the SPD appeared more open to reform.³⁵ Especially the CSU, which typically wins all the direct mandates in Bavaria (although the Greens won their first-ever seat in Munich in 2021), is against reducing the number of constituencies. They have also argued that the resulting larger populations will make it more challenging for deputies to deliver constituent services. The last government did have another proposal—reducing districts by 19 and allowing seven overhanging mandates not to be compensated—but it petered out just before the summer break in early July 2020, so that there was not enough time to make any changes for the 2021 election.³⁶ The governing parties passed a new law in mid-2023 that would cap the Bundestag at 630. The number of seats to which a party is entitled would be solely based on the second vote totals, meaning that some constituency winners might not be seated (no more overhanging mandates) and that parties would no longer be entitled to keep all constituency seats won. The state of Bavaria and several others have asked the Constitutional Court to intervene and it is unclear if these changes will pass muster.³⁷

Looking in more detail at the composition of the parliament, the proportion of women edged up but is nowhere near parity, being dragged down by center-right and radical-right parties, particularly the AfD. The proportion of women peaked in 2013 at 36.5 percent and then plummeted to 30.7

Table 0.3: The 20th Bundestag

Party	Direct Mandates	Overhanging Mandates	Compensatory Mandates	Percent Women	Percent with Migration Background
SPD	121	10	26	41.7	17.0
CDU/CSU	143	23	18	23.4	4.1
Greens	16		24	59.3	14.4
FDP			16	23.9	5.4
AfD	16	1	13	13.3	7.2
Left	3		7	53.8	28.2
Overall		34	104	34.8	11.3

percent in the last Bundestag. The parliament also has a record proportion of deputies with a migration background, but at 11.3 percent this is well below that demographic's share of the country's population (about 26 percent).³⁸ Once again, this is mainly because of the center-right and right-wing parties—although the AfD has a higher share of such deputies than the CDU/CSU. Interestingly, two AfD members originally hail from Romania, three others come from Kazakhstan, the Czech Republic, and South Tyrol, and one has an American father.³⁹ Finally, there are two transgender deputies for the first time, and six members under the age of 25.

The Aftermath

Not long after the results were finalized, the SPD, Greens, and FDP entered into negotiations to form the first ever “traffic light” coalition at the federal level. Such a coalition at the state level dates back to the early 1990s: Brandenburg, Bremen, and Rhineland-Palatinate have all had such governments. The process began with informal bilateral talks (*Vorsondierungen*) between the FDP and Greens, perhaps as a pre-emptive response to their disagreements back in 2017 that scuttled Merkel's attempt to form a Jamaica coalition. Then two rounds of more formal negotiations (*Sondierungsgespräche* and *Koalitionsverhandlungen*) began in late October among the three parties in seven working groups devoted to themes like “climate protection in a social-ecological market economy” or “respect, opportunities, and social security in the modern working world” with an equal number of representatives from each of the three parties.⁴⁰ The process appeared to work efficiently with the party leaders, then opened to the working groups with nearly 200 politicians participating. There were next to no leaks and few reports of acrimony—except within the Greens and SPD over who would occupy portfolios like health and agriculture. After each potential coalition partner received validation from its respective parties for the 178-page coalition agreement, a new government was inaugurated on 8 December 2021.

The agenda of the new government is indeed a reformist one with a heavy emphasis on speeding up digitalization, addressing climate change, and facilitating the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Social justice issues are addressed by raising the minimum wage and working to increase the affordability of housing, especially in the booming cities.⁴¹ Combating right-wing extremism will be a higher priority. There are also a variety of possible liberalizing reforms, such as eliminating the prohibition on doctors advertising abortions and reducing the voting age to 16. Nevertheless, through its

Table 0.4: The Scholz I Cabinet

Cabinet Minister	Party	Portfolio	Home State
Olaf Scholz	SPD	Chancellor	Hamburg
Annalena Baerbock	Greens	Foreign Affairs	Brandenburg
Robert Habeck	Greens	Economic Affairs and Climate Policy/Vice-Chancellor	Schleswig-Holstein
Christian Lindner	FDP	Finance	North Rhine-Westphalia
Nancy Faeser	SPD	Interior	Hesse
Hubertus Heil	SPD	Labor and Social Affairs	Lower Saxony
Marco Buschmann	FDP	Justice and Consumer Protection	North Rhine-Westphalia
Boris Pistorius *	SPD	Defense	Lower Saxony
Karl Lauterbach	SPD	Health	North Rhine-Westphalia
Volker Wissing	FDP	Transport and Digital Infrastructure	Rhineland-Palatinate
Svenja Schulze	SPD	Economic Cooperation and Development	North Rhine-Westphalia
Klara Geywitz	SPD	Housing	Brandenburg
Steffi Lemke **	Greens	Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety	Saxony-Anhalt
Cem Özdemir	Greens	Food and Agriculture	Baden-Württemberg
Lisa Paus	Greens	Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth	North Rhine-Westphalia/ Berlin
Bettina Stark-Watzinger	FDP	Education and Research	Hesse
Wolfgang Schmidt	SPD	Head of the Chancellery	Hamburg

* Pistorius replaced the heavily-criticized Christine Lambrecht in January 2023.

** Anne Spiegel was the initial Green minister, but resigned after heavy pressure in April 2022. As the serving minister of the environment in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, she holidayed in France not long after the flooding in July 2021 and lied about working remotely.

control of the all-powerful finance ministry, the FDP will likely ensure that the tax burden on businesses and individuals will not increase and that the costs for the transition to carbon neutrality are not overly excessive.

The new Cabinet has 17 members, one more than in the last governments because of the creation of a new housing ministry. Excluding Scholz, this was initially the first gender-balanced Cabinet in German history. With Cem Özdemir, it also has one of its first ministers with a migration background.⁴² There is also a distinct northern German coloring with only one minister from Baden-Württemberg and no one from Bavaria—the two richest states in the country. Easterners are also underrepresented with only three individuals—and Baerbock moved to Brandenburg as an adult, originally hailing from Lower Saxony. Finally, there is much combined experience with four SPD ministers having served under Merkel (including Lambrecht and Schulze) and several others (e.g., Habeck, Faeser) at the state level. Others have extensive parliamentary or party leadership experience.⁴³ Health Minister Karl Lauterbach is also a trained physician.

At the party level, there have been some important changes since the election. Walter-Borjans has stepped down as co-leader of the SPD, replaced by the previous general secretary, Lars Klingbeil. Kühnert has taken over as general secretary. The CDU installed a new leader, Merz, and a federal steering committee at the end of January 2022. Merz also took over as head of the Union parliamentary group, a position that launched Merkel into the chancellery nearly 20 years ago. The FDP installed Bundestag deputy Bijan Djir-Sarai as the party's general secretary in the spring of 2022 when the previous incumbent, Volker Wissing, joined the Cabinet. The Greens replaced Baerbock and Habeck with the rather leftist Ricarda Lang, twenty-eight years old and the first openly bisexual member of parliament, and Omid Nouripour, a foreign policy specialist born in Iran.

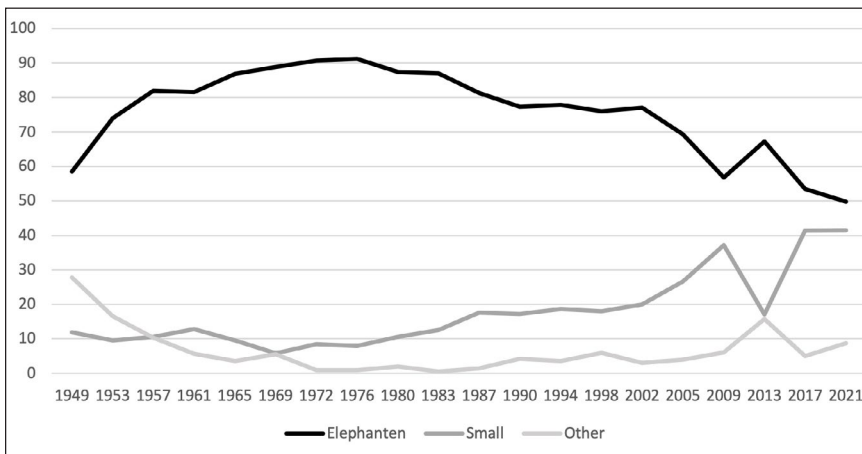
Finally, political life replete with scandals continues as ever. In January 2022, for instance, there were allegations and potential charges that the leadership of the Greens (including Baerbock and Habeck) had embezzled 1,500 Euros of COVID bonuses in 2020.⁴⁴ Scholz may still face questions dating from his time as finance minister. And the AfD continues its tumult. In late January 2022, party co-leader Jörg Meuthen left his position and the AfD, citing “totalitarian overtones” and a cultish attitude toward the coronavirus.⁴⁵ A court decision in March 2022 would allow for formal surveillance of the party.⁴⁶ Minister-President Schwesig—and others, notably former Chancellor Schröder, who many are trying to kick out of the party—came under pressure after the Russian invasion of Ukraine due to their strong support for the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

Contextualizing the Result

The biggest trends in German elections over the last few decades are the decline of catch-all “Elephanten” parties and the growing support for smaller parties. In fact, the vote share of the CDU/CSU and SPD dropped from over 90 percent in the mid-1970s to just under 50 percent by 2021. The key factor was the changing social structure—specifically, the steady drop in trade union membership and church attendance, where the catch-all parties’ core voters were located, socialized, and mobilized. More generally, greater demographic diversity, coupled with changing and more pluralistic values, has led German voters to have much more specific preferences, resulting in more fragmented political outcomes (a common trend across most advanced democratic systems). Turnout rates declined for decades until experiencing a slight uptick in the last couple of cycles: 76.4 percent in 2017 and 76.6 percent in 2021. The fragmentation of the Bundestag, with six entrenched parliamentary groups, has increased the complexity of and difficulties in forming coalitions and will have marked effects on policy outcomes.

Of course, the effects of the electoral system should once again be mentioned. As with Duverger’s law, we should expect a multi-party system given the essentially PR methods employed—even more so with the so-called compensatory mandates (over 100 in 2021) necessitated by Constitutional Court rulings. Indeed, the effective number of party calculations based on votes (N_v) and seats (N_s) shows that the electoral system has shifted from its

Figure 0.2: Voting Trends in the Federal Republic



long-term moderate multi-party nature to almost extreme multi-party territory, the anomaly of 2013 notwithstanding.

Another structural feature is that continued socio-economic challenges in eastern Germany have created a persistent cleavage and an electorate with preferences that are very different from those in the West. This has been more recently manifested by disproportional support for the AfD in that region. In 2021, for instance, the party gained 19.1 percent in the East versus 8.2 percent in the West, whereas in 2017, it was 21.9 percent versus 10.7 percent.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Left Party received 10 percent of the eastern vote versus 3.6 percent in the West. Clearly, over 30 years of unity have not unified the electorate.

Elections have become more competitive and less predictable with long-term trends being replaced by shorter-term fluctuations. This was manifested through increased volatility after 2002. Before that election, volatility was around or below the long-term international baseline of about 9 percent. Interestingly, it peaked in 2017—when the AfD first entered and the FDP re-entered the Bundestag—and came down in 2021.

Moreover, personalities appear to matter more than ever—Schröder, Merkel, and even Scholz attest to this. Of course, with the exceptions of Schröder and, decades before, Willy Brandt, post-war chancellors have been remarkably unremarkable—characterized by what Ludger Helms has called “noncharismatic personalism.”⁴⁸ It is quite fascinating that with Scholz, German voters ended up selecting the dispositionally most Merkel-like of all of the options. But apparently non-dramatic, wonkish, managerial

Figure 0.3: The Effective Number of Parties Based on Votes (N_v) and Seats (N_s)

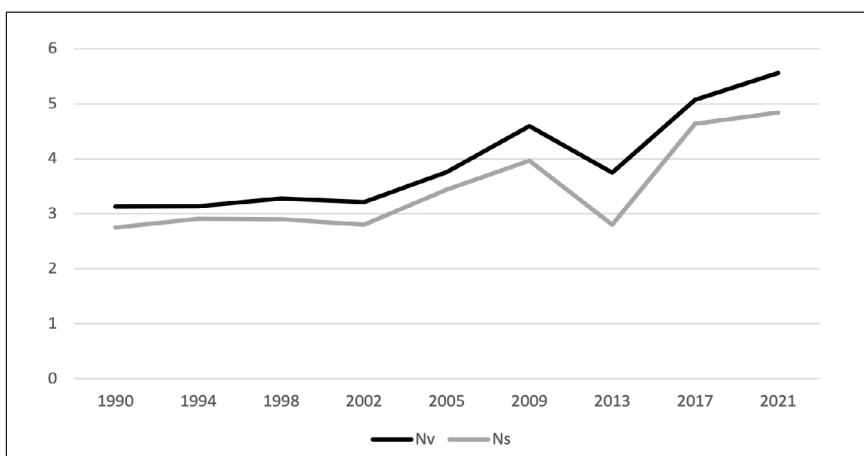
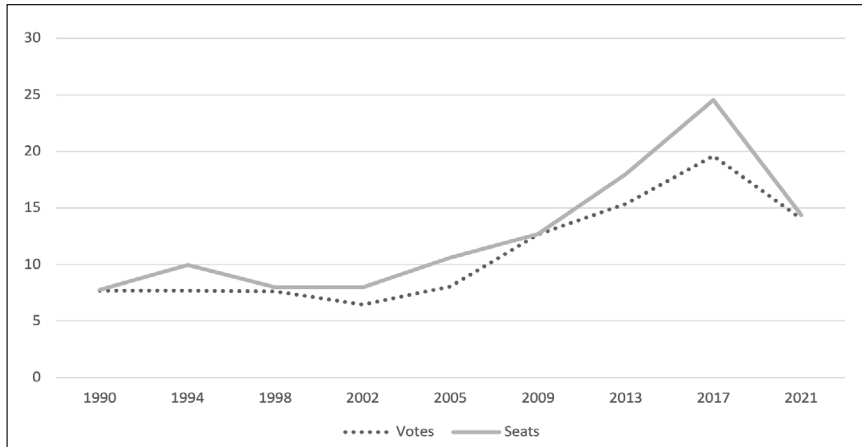


Figure 0.4: Electoral Volatility since Reunification



leaders—especially in the context of two- and now three-party coalition governments—generate attraction. The words of Helmut Schmidt seem to resonate deeply with German voters: “Anyone who has visions should go to the doctor.” Still, it is widely believed that Scholz and his steady, disciplined campaign is the reason the SPD did as well as it did. We shall see if there is something more to this victory. Indeed, several commentators think that Scholz’s SPD has found a new winning formula with its “respect” theme, which was featured in all campaign slogans.⁴⁹

Finally, voters’ preferences in this election were curious. On the one hand, they ousted the CDU/CSU and with it a conservative voice in governance—a shift in power that is important to note. On the other hand, they rewarded a party that has shared power more often than not for most of the last generation. Scholz’s SPD appealed precisely because it appeared centrist, pragmatic, and moderate, yet still represented new policies and new directions, particularly because of its likely coalition partners. Germans wanted change, but not as much as the Greens (and FDP) emphasized during the campaign. They seem to like their reforms in smaller, digestible doses—tweaks but not a revolution, newish but not novel policies. There is still a widespread aversion to excessive public debt, and few are clamoring for an increase in taxes or energy prices. Furthermore, the government still needs to cooperate intensively with the states where the CDU/CSU remains a significant political force. The consensus politics of the “grand coalition state” are still largely operative (notwithstanding the AfD and the Left and their supporters). Progressives and “fundis” now in government should take note.

The 2022 *Zeitenwende*

Three months into the new government's term, Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. For months, Putin had been saber-rattling and positioning troops on the border of Ukraine in both Russia and Belarus, purportedly to engage in maneuvers. German leaders had steadfastly maintained previous policy stances, continuing to engage Russia through trade (*Wandel durch Handel*) and using only diplomatic means to resolve conflicts, often justified with reference to crimes Germans had committed during the Nazi era.⁵⁰ For instance, despite increasingly desperate pleas from Ukrainian leaders and NATO allies, the government refused to send war materiel to Kiev, instead offering to send 5,000 helmets. Discontinuing the controversial Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline or agreeing to other possible sanctions were also not seriously considered, although the rhetoric of the German government harshened as February progressed.

Putin's invasion surprised almost everyone in Germany and beyond. This shock had an almost immediate effect on German politics and the new government. The coalition agreement from late 2021 was made superfluous almost overnight—as someone noted, this was a peacetime agenda and suddenly Europe was at war for the first time since 1945. The shift in tone, policy, and public opinion was dizzying. Just days after the invasion during an unprecedented Sunday session of the Bundestag on 27 February, Scholz issued a new governmental statement (*Regierungserklärung*), announcing dramatic changes in policy. In essence, he signaled the end of decades of consensus on policy toward Russia/Ostpolitik. The coalition supported other Western governments in imposing the most draconian sanctions ever placed on a country. Most German companies have stopped engaging with Russia, ceasing trade, production, and commerce. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline was shut down. Oligarchs' assets would be frozen. Moreover, Ukrainians would get refuge in Germany without bureaucratic hassle, and the Ukrainian government would get military support. Defense spending would immediately be bolstered by 100 billion Euros (essentially twice what the country was spending per year) and would increase to over 2 percent of GDP in the medium and long term.⁵¹ Although many details are still being worked out and there are major procurement challenges ahead, one big decision has already been made to buy thirty-five F-35 fighters from the U.S.⁵² These planes are capable of carrying nuclear warheads—an issue that was highly controversial as recently as fall 2021.

So far, public opinion has been behind these momentous shifts. In March 2022, for example, 67 percent were supportive and 29 percent against

sending arms to Ukraine—versus 74 percent who were opposed a month earlier. In addition, 88 percent (versus 9 percent) think Germany can handle many Ukrainian refugees.⁵³ A year and a half after Putin’s invasion, the governing parties are struggling in the polls. The SPD hovers at 17-18 percent, nearly 10 points below their 2021 result. The Greens are around their 2021 number, but the FDP at 6-7 percent has lost nearly half its support. The CDU is up 3-4 percent, but the AfD has surged to around 20 percent, unsettling many. Germans are not happy with the politicians in government, but assess the CDU and AfD leaders even more negatively. The economy even tipped into recession by summer 2023.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, all of this is extremely fluid upon this writing. The energy situation is extremely precarious with massive reductions (even a ban) on Russian imports. Inflation, reduced trade, and a prolonged recession are worrisome. Moreover, the country cannot shift to other suppliers or complete the transition to renewable energy overnight. The outcome of Putin’s invasion is still unclear, and whether the spending and public opinion support in such a hitherto pacifistic country will continue is up in the air. Indeed, over 40,000 people—including many prominent individuals such as Margot Käßmann, Gregor Gysi, Jakob Augstein, and Katja Riemann—have signed a pacifistic petition, *Der Appell*, which calls for “Preserving Democracy and the Welfare State. No Armament in the Basic Law!”⁵⁵ Still, the changes experienced in the early months of 2022 are truly epochal. Given successful efforts to anchor the increased defense spending in the Constitution, shifting public opinion and even a change in government in 2025 will not matter so much. This is indeed a veritable *Zeitenwende*, as the Germans would say.

The Contributions

This volume is based on contributions to three special issues of *German Politics and Society* published over the course of 2022. We have brought together an array of experts from across the United States, Britain, and Europe to analyze all facets of the momentous 2021 Bundestag election and the state of German politics and public policy. This volume, however, does not just cover the change in government resulting from the election results, but the paradigm shift in foreign and domestic policy that Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine spurred.

Several authors such as Frank Decker, Philipp Adorf, Ludger Helms and Sven Siefken delve into larger systemic issues such as developments in the party system, the evolution of politicians’ path to the chancellorship, and how

coalition negotiations have changed over time. Joyce Mushaben and Louise Davidson-Schmich look at how parties have addressed gender parity and the LGBTQI community, while David Patton addresses the strategies and results for the several smaller parties in the current system.

Numerous contributors such as Matthias Dilling, Ed Turner, Davide Vampa, Matthias Scantamburlo, Niko Switek, Michael Hansen, Jonathan Olsen, and Andreas Wüst analyze the election-year experiences of individual parties: the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Left, and AfD. Lars Rensmann and Thijs de Zee examine the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and Hannah Alarian delves into lingering effects of attitudes towards immigration on vote choice.

Turning to more specific policy concerns, Carol Hager looks at the shifting role of climate change on the campaign and voters' choices, whereas Mark Vail examines evolving notions of the social market economy in 2021 and beyond. Finally, Jackson Janes, Stephen Szabo, and Jonas Driedger turn to the quickly-changing realm of foreign policy, in particular policy towards Russia.

Acknowledgments

There are several organizations that have made this scholarship possible: the American-German Institute in Washington, DC, the BMW Center for German and European Studies, and the Department of Government at Georgetown University. I would also like to thank the International Association for the Study of German Politics, supported by the DAAD, which organized an outstanding election study tour to Berlin in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Notes

1. This gets a little ambiguous because the CDU and CSU have always been legally independent parties, albeit in a perpetual coalition at the federal level, including for campaign purposes. Also, the other parties in the governments of Adenauer, such as the German Party, were small, niche groupings that had ceased to exist by the late 1950s to early 1960s.
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