

Dynamics of the German political party system since 2008

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Round Table

"Trends in the transformation of the German political party system:
Reasons and Consequences."

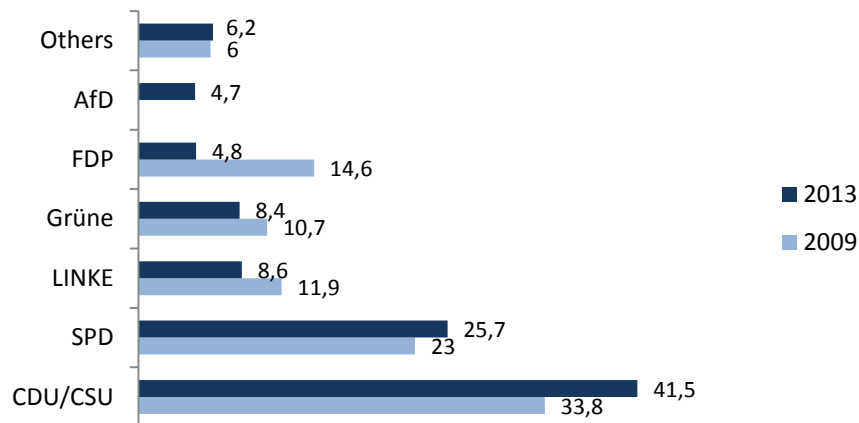
Transformation of Party and Political Landscape in EU Countries during Post Crisis Period

Why it is appropriate to speak of dynamics

There is a lot of mobility within the German party system, starting with the unification of the two Germanys, continuing after 2008 until today.

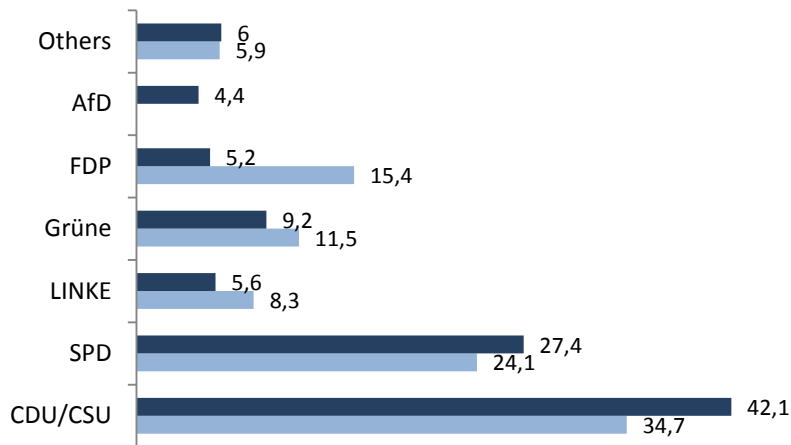
This statement, however, already leads us to a first, very important, question: is there *one* German party system at all? I will say, no, not at all: since 1990, we are faced with two party-systems, an East German and a West German one. There are still two political cultures, depending on different political generations and historical life-experiences. Their respective feelings and attitudes have grown closer to one another, but they evolve more slowly than we thought in the time of reunification. I will comment in more detail on this process later on.

Graph 1: General elections 2013 in Germany (total, percentage points)



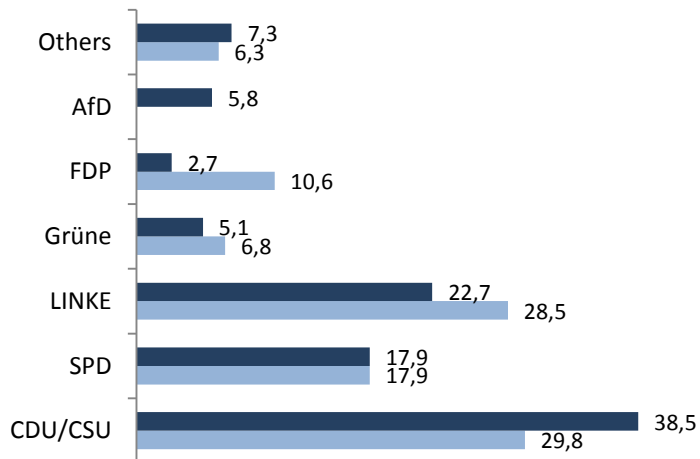
(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter/ FAZ)

Graph 2: General elections 2013 in West Germany (percentage points)



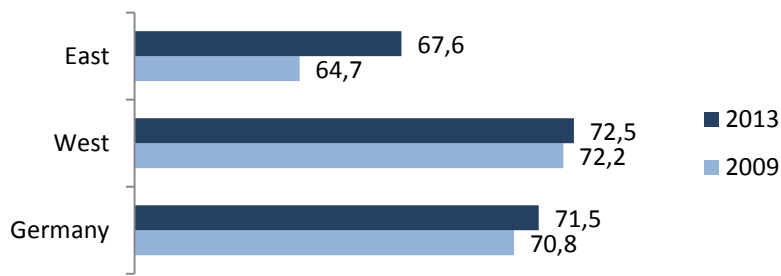
(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter/ FAZ)

Graph 3: General elections 2013 in East Germany (percentage points)



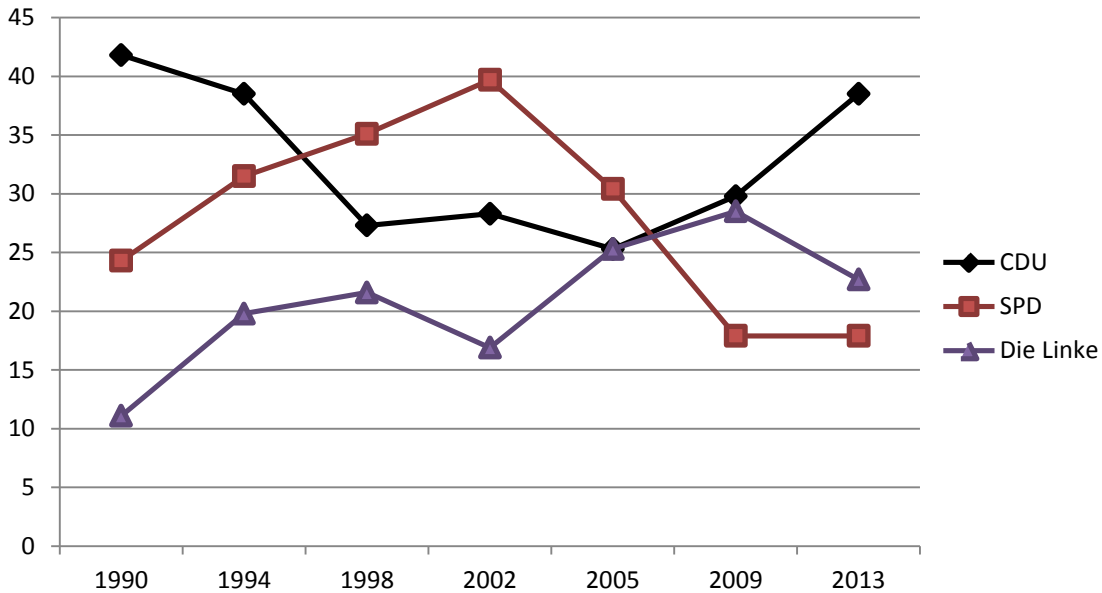
(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter/ FAZ)

Graph 4: General election 2013/ 2009 – turnout



(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter/ FAZ)

Graph 5: General election results after reunification in the eastern Länder, including eastern districts of Berlin



(Data source: Der Bundeswahlleiter)

The second question: Is there a power shift between the two big parties in the first decade of this century – also important for the development since 2008. Yes, there is.

The former stalemate of CDU/CSU and SPD since 2005 by the growing dominance of the C-parties. The lead of Merkel highly increased in 2009 to 10.8% and in the last elections 2013 to 15.8% – disastrous for the SPD. Presently, the C-parties lead in the latest polls by 13 % – in spite of losses chancellor Merkel had to endure due to the refugee-crisis. There is no chance for the SPD to gain the top in the competition.

A third question: Is there a change in the political culture?

Yes, there is. Not the basic values – orientations towards democracy, pluralism, rule of law, but rather in the meaning and realization of these orientations in day to day life. Nowadays, we are driven by the questions of German identity and its challenges by the refugee stream coming from very different cultures. To defend a specific German culture: is that a politically incorrect, maybe even an extremist right-wing position? A lot of people are feeling challenged and criticize a lack of answers by the established political parties. This is the reason for the growing gains in that the AfD has been able to realize in recent polls: a relatively new populist party on the right, now about 10% – not at all near 30%, nor even beyond 20% as in France or other European countries. The nazi past still moderates right-wing extremism in Germany. But presently, the situation might become quite challenging, because rather a lot of people perceive a blank in conservative positions. In the latest polls, a majority saw the Merkel-CDU left of the middle, of

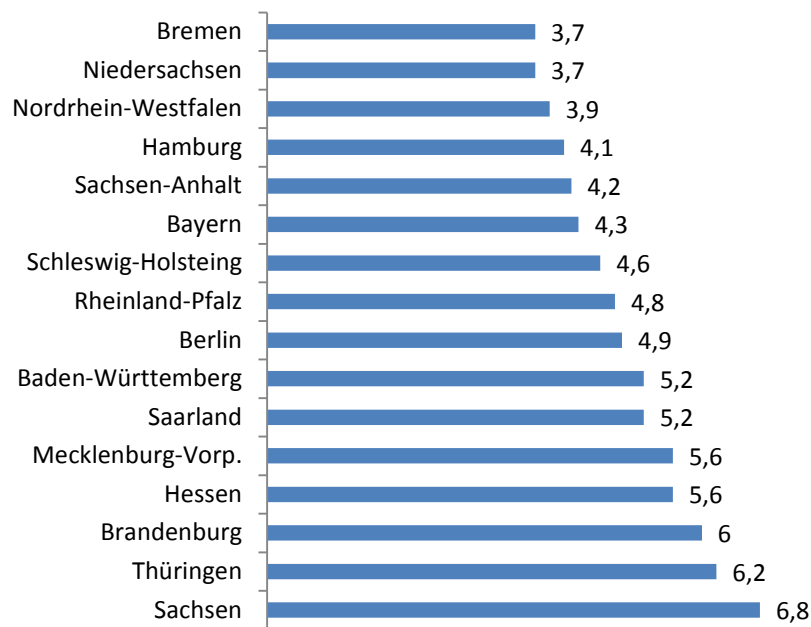
the center of the political party system. Only the Bavarian CSU and especially the new AfD are placed on the right.

Graph 6: AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in the general elections 2013, national level



(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter/ FAZ)

Graph 7: AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in the general elections 2013, federal states

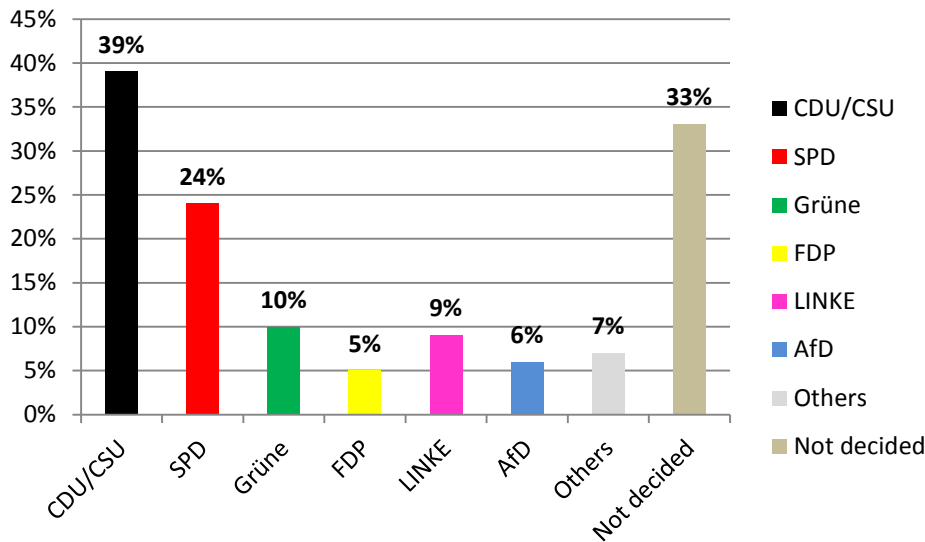


(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter/ FAZ)

What I have just described is a “Merkel-problem”, one that has recently been seriously discussed within her own party; not only because of her “welcome culture policy”. Merkel is doing nothing to support or shape her party’s traditional base. But there are fractions within the party (conservatives, catholics, middle class, business people) that are marginalized vis à vis the dominance of the chancellor. She – and therefore the party – opposes neither values shifts (as for instance gay marriage) nor socio-political overreaching. The media call this the social-democratization of the conservatives. Months ago, the traditionalists within the CDU had no

alternative, Merkel obviously calculated. With the AfD, this calculation is no longer valid. Merkel's reputation suffered immensely, the party lost 7% in the polls. As I told you: there is a lot of dynamic and mobility in the party system.

Graph 8: *If tomorrow were General Elections, who would you vote for?*



(Data: FORSA, 03.12.2015)

This mobility characterizes developments in the German society, processes of pluralization and individualization – moving away from the old social structural criteria. For instance, two thirds of trade union oriented employees vote for the SPD, but their share of votes still makes up only 10% of the party's electorate. 75% of church-going Catholics vote for the CDU/CSU. Their share of the total number of votes: only 10% as well. Neither labor nor Christian groups are strong enough to carry a large party. Concentration on core members would be counterproductive. and Merkel in principle could be right. But to deny 10% could be ineffective, too, because that could cost the party the top position in the ballots.

These processes of dealignment in the party system cause mobility, swing and fluidity in the elections. It is not ideology, not class-consciousness – “It's the economy, stupid”: prosperity, welfare, lifestyle. It is certainly possible for the current situation in Germany to be seen as “abnormal”, as challenging in terms of culture and welfare. Then the success of the populist AfD would perhaps be an indicator of realignment – and we would have now two opposing trends: dealignment and realignment. If this were true – what would be the outcome?

As far as political culture is concerned, we must have a look at current conditions of German parties, their positions and reputation within society. We see symptoms of a crisis – especially the decline of catch-all parties that have been very important for the development and stability

of the political system in the post-war period. Their orientation has been one toward compromise and consensus building. Maybe in the future we will face coalition-building processes like those in the Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden.

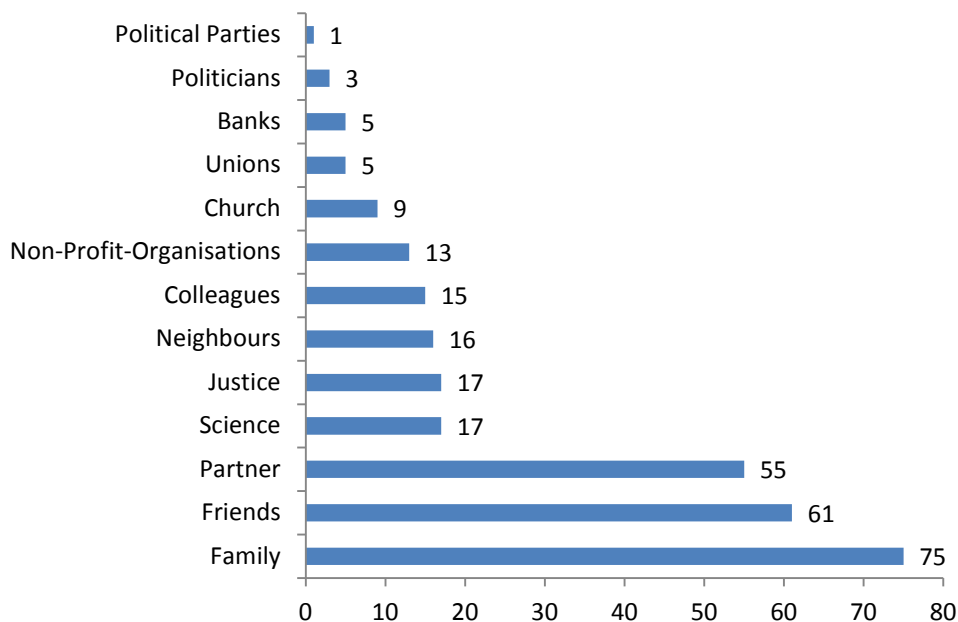
But let's have a look at some details:

The current condition of German parties

At the beginning of the 21st century the catch-all parties show symptoms of a crisis – a crisis in the relation between citizens and especially the major parties, which are manifest in the following points:

- **political (dis)trust:** In the early 1980s, every second person had confidence in parties. Between 1995 and 2011, this attitude fell dramatically from 41% to 16%. Regarding the trust placed in them, the parties are figuring as an absolute bottom among public institutions and organizations. Depending on concrete policy fields there are up to 58% who do not attribute any problem-solving skills to any of the parties (probably not: 37%, not: 21%).

Graph 9: Who do Germans trust (%)?

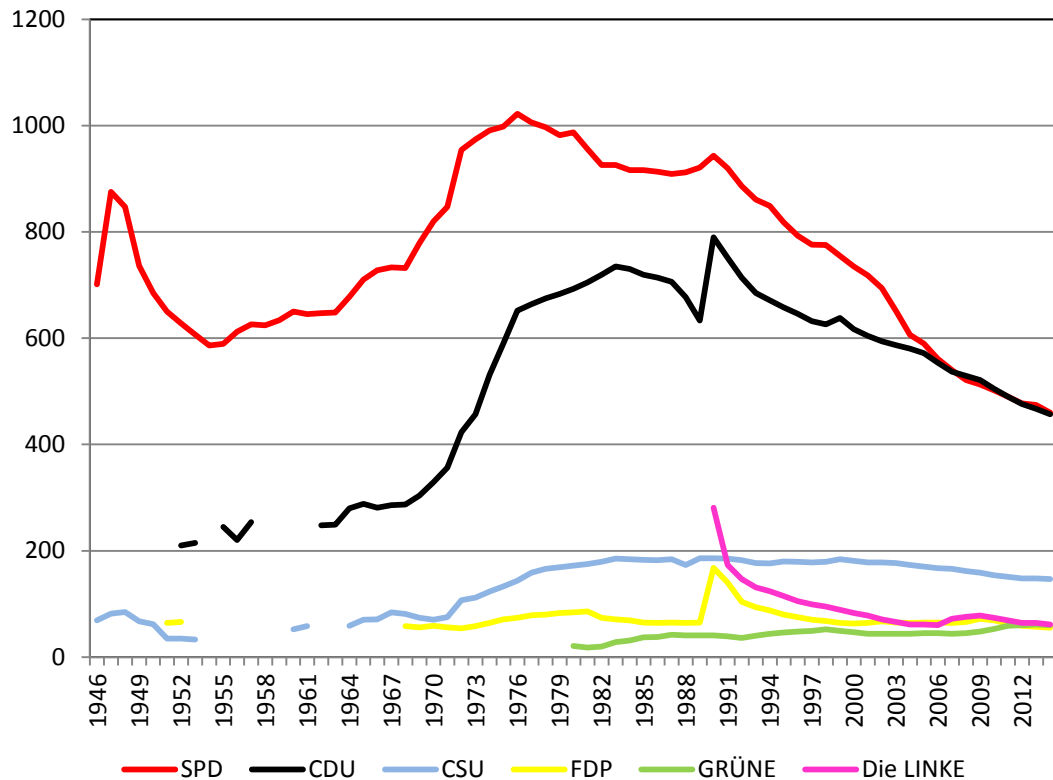


(Data: BAT Stiftung für Zukunftsfragen 2013)

- **Alignment of party members:** Since 1990, the SPD has lost about 45% of its members, the CDU about a third (as of 2010). The CSU stays relatively stable with 13% decline, signaling that it can resist the trend to a certain degree; although still under

incomparably better political-cultural and social conditions than the other (federal) parties.

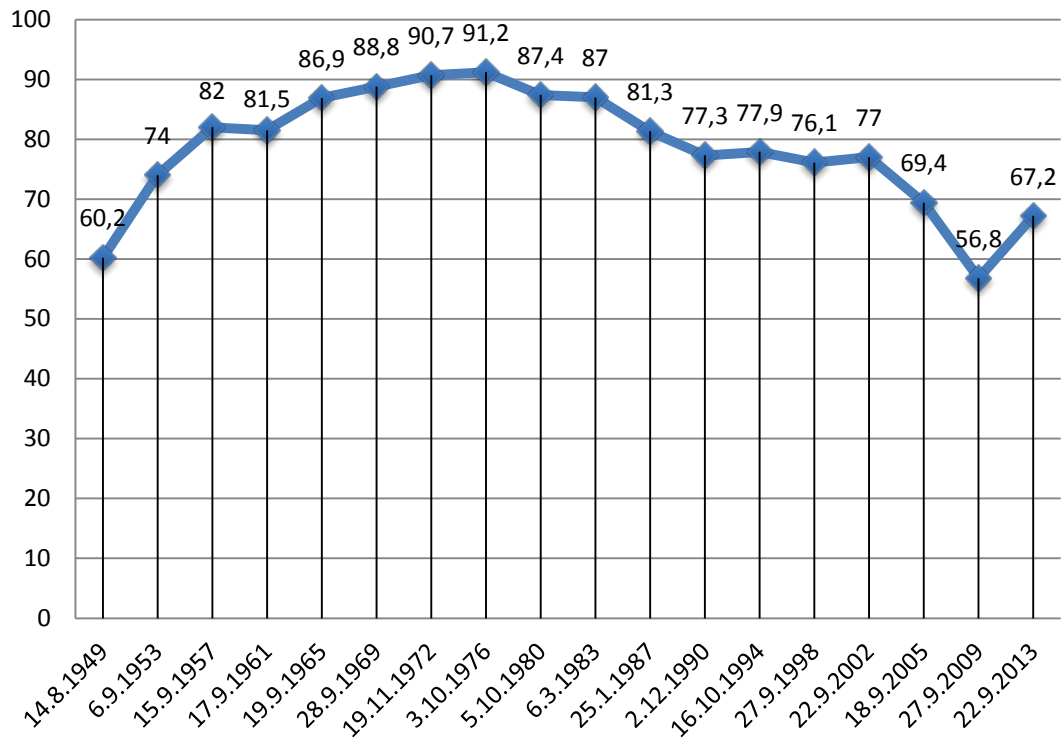
Graph 10: Party membership in Germany 1946-2015 (thousands)



(Data: Niedermayer, O.: Mitgliederdatenbank)

- **Declining electoral cohesiveness:** In their heyday, the CDU and the SPD bound 91.2% of voters (2007), in 2005, this number had declined to only 69,4% and in the elections of 2009 a feeble 56.8% - less than in 1949 (60.2%). The 2013 general elections might have been a turning point to this trend, when the two catch-all parties were able to expand their share of the votes by 12,6%. Of the overall electorate, they tied 82.1% in 1976, 53% in 2005, and just 40% in 2009 (dependent in addition, on the decline in voter turnout). 2013 saw, as already shown, a slight reverse in the trend: CDU and SPD united 48% of the total electorate.

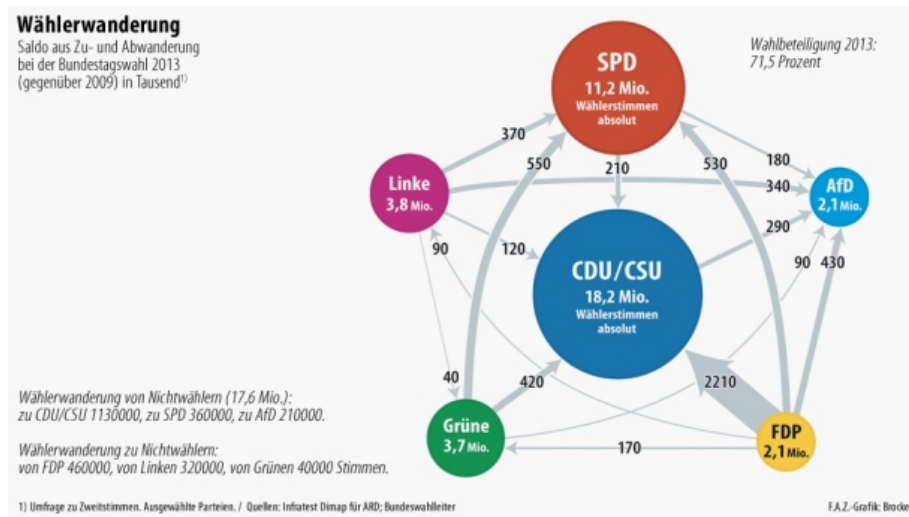
Graph 11: Percentage won by two catch-all parties (CDU/CSU and SPD)



(Data: Der Bundeswahlleiter)

- **Swing voters as a new form:** Declining voter loyalty is attended by increasing volatility: Minus 11.2 percentage points as for the SPD from one election (2005) to another (2009) – an outcome that illustrates a magnitude in swing of so far unimagined dimensions. The same phenomenon prevails in case of the dramatic erosion of the Bavarian CSU: -5.5 percentage points at the local and -17.3 points in the Bavarian state election in 2008, and -6.7 points in the election to the Bundestag in 2009. One and a half years later, survey data explicitly documented the spontaneously responsive volatility: FDP – 10.6%, the Green party (BÜNDNIS 90/ DIE GRÜNEN) +13.3%. The elections of 2013 add to this image. CDU/CSU could gain +7.8%, while the FDP lost -9.8%, AfD +4,7%, Greens: 5.8%.

Graph 12: Voter swings 2009-2013



(Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 24. 09. 2013, p. 10)

- **Ascent and consequent descent of smaller parties and a rising differentiation of the party system:** Due to these phenomena, the 2009 federal election led to a (temporary) strengthening of smaller political parties: FDP +4.7%, DIE GRÜNEN +2.7% and DIE LINKE +3.2%. Once again, one might interpret the federal elections of 2013 as a possible turning point: DIE LINKE -2.3%; DIE GRÜNEN +1.6%; FDP -9.8%. However, this can also be seen as yet another instance of volatility. A fundamental consequence is the unpredictability of elections results and, therefore, the reduced possibility to anticipate political constellations and potential government majorities.

Will the Catch-all Party Fall Prey to the Orientation Shift?

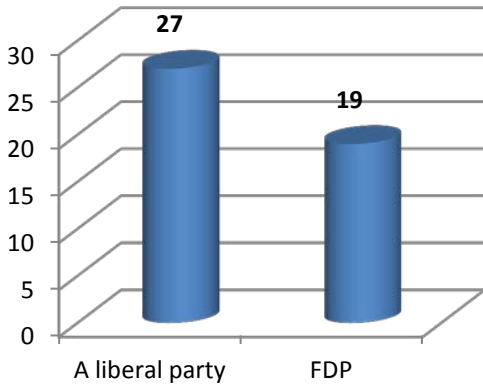
My fourth and last question: Are the days of the catch-all parties in Germany numbered? Generally, it is beneficial to hold on to the increasingly anachronistic demand for pragmatically-oriented “catch-all parties.” It serves the representation of a wider spectrum of interests and orientations or at least makes us assume so. As in the past, the other approach remains the option for smaller and mid-sized parties in 2013.

These parties signify, virtually, the orientation shift in society, moving away from the old social structural criteria. They have long since been gaining in popularity while catch-all parties have been decreasing in representation for four decades. This shift in orientation demands that politics project a more extensive expression of individuals’ personal goals and lifestyle, and it is already strong enough to open parliaments’ doors to new parties.

The classic example of this is the Free Democratic Party (FDP), a party of liberal, middle-class, individualist, and state-regulated citizenship. It is a group established as a party, but never a catch-all party. In 2013, it suffered a severe defeat in the elections, not surmounting the 5%

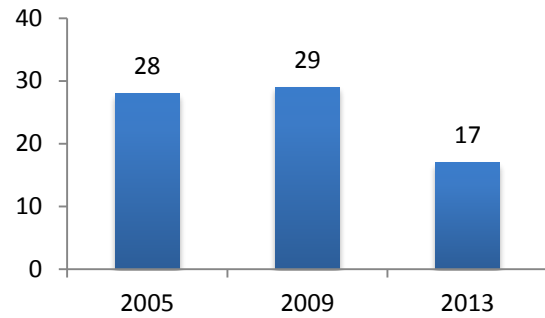
entry level obstacle and hence not present in the current Bundestag. Surprisingly enough, surveys have shown that the electorate wishes to see liberal values represented – it just did not see how the FDP was still fulfilling this role.

Graph 13: Germany needs a liberal party/ the FDP (%)



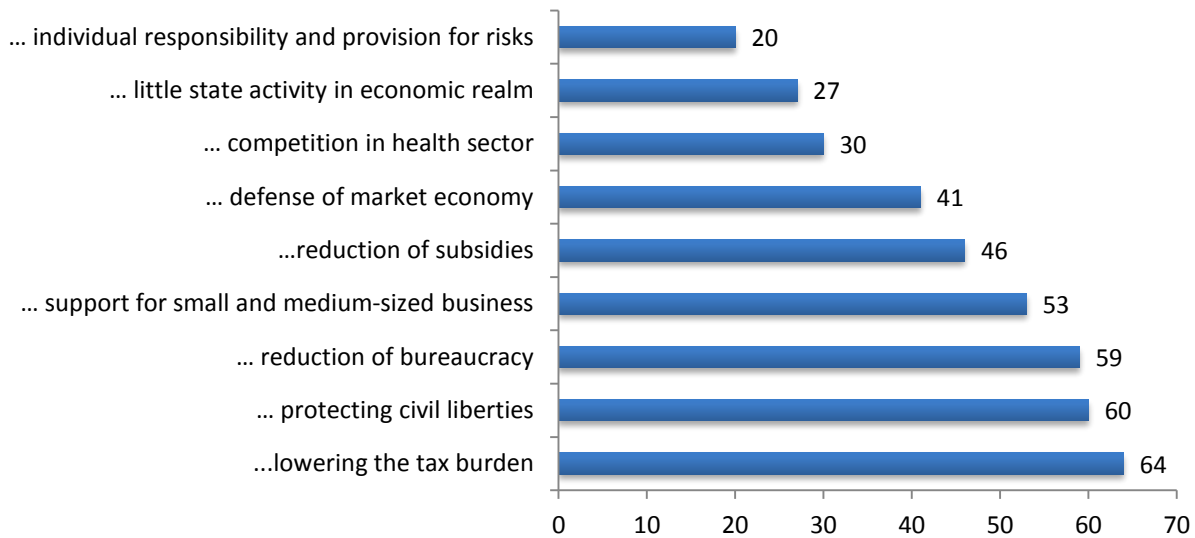
(Data: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach/ FAZ)

Graph 14: It is important that the FDP be part of parliament (Answer: Yes, %)



(Data: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach/ FAZ)

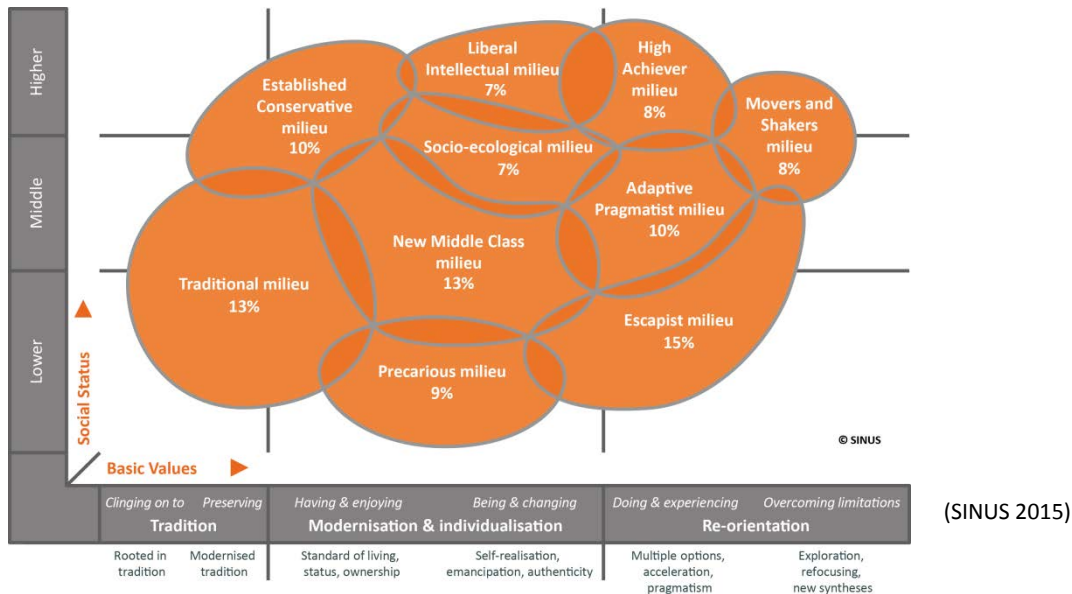
Graph 15: The FDP stands for... (%)



(Data: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach/ FAZ)

There are, without any doubt, new social groups looking for political representation. The work of SINUS Institute pictures these groups quite clearly.

Graph 16: SINUS social groups



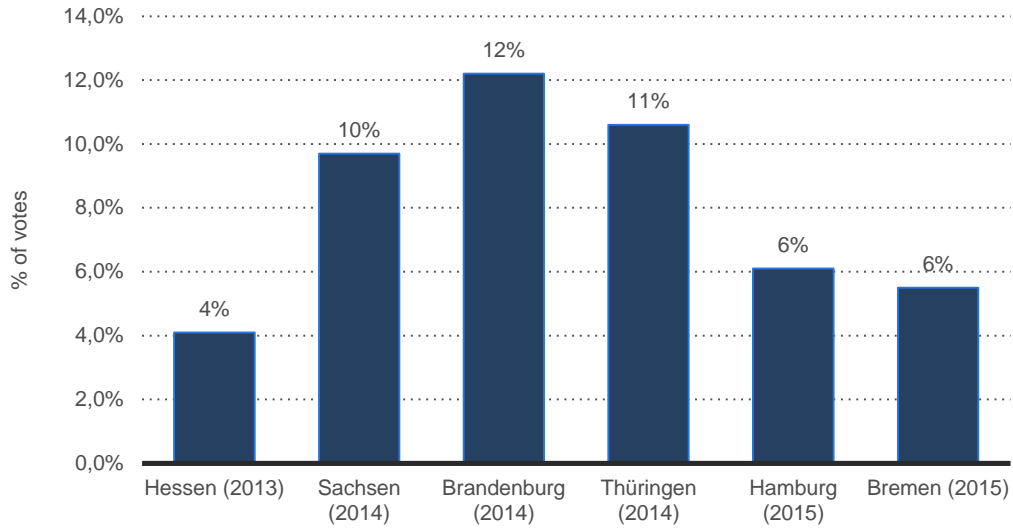
The “new” is represented by the Greens as an expression of ecologically-minded voters and participatory lifestyle. After entering the Bundestag in the 1980s, they will be the third-strongest force in the Bundestag in 2013. They are similarly well represented in state parliaments. Representatives of a political generation and its lifestyle, rooted in the 1970s and 1980s, they still primarily stand for ecological issues and the socio-political “left.”

In the 1990s, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)—now The Left/ DIE LINKE—began representing what can be clearly seen as the social interest of a significant part of East German voters. In the former GDR states, the Left is as strong as the CDU and SPD, but in western Germany the party is nearly meaningless. Its popularity is driven by its efforts for social equality of eastern Germany.

In 2011 and 2012, the Pirate Party made it into four state parliaments (Berlin, Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, Nordrhein-Westfalen) out of nowhere—with moderate political competences. After that, it has never been able to surpass the 5% threshold. It is the party of the Internet generation lifestyle, lacking professional access to institutions and procedures of representative democracy, which it intends to change into a “liquid democracy”.

The aforementioned right-wing, populist AfD entered the political stage as a new party, skeptical of the euro. It was not elected to the Bundestag in 2013, but has since altered its profile and won seats in some federal parliaments – although not in Bavaria, where the CSU itself maintains an obvious distance toward European institutions.

Graph 17: Election results for the AfD in federal state elections



(www.wahlrecht.de)

Other than the FDP, all these parties address specific, circumstantial, and generational issues that are not focal points to the catch-all parties—ecology, social challenges of reunification, “liquid democracy,” and the euro crisis. As parties of specific political generations and their experiences they garnish their “brand core” rather incidentally with additional topics and competencies—or pseudo-competencies. Unlike the two large parties that represent general interests by maximizing the issues and social spectrum they cover, these parties basically do not pursue a comprehensive, coordinated offering across all political fields. The appeal of the comprehensive party platforms espoused by the large parties used to be typical of certain generations—typical of the founding and consolidating generations of the Federal Republic that faced basic challenges and broad alternatives. Their accomplishments have created the opportunity for more focused orientations and topics, specifications that do not question the basic consensus in the core, but do cultivate the political competition with alternatives. Election outcomes support this dynamic.