Chapter 3

Partisan Dealignment and Voting Choice

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Herr and Frau Schneider had grown up in post-war Germany. They have very distinct images of the parties, and especially the two large *Volksparteien*. The Christian Democrats (CDU) had brought peace and prosperity to Germany, and they strongly agreed with the CDU on economic and religious issues as upper-middle-class Christians. In contrast, they see the Social Democrats (SPD) as untrustworthy and too close to the communists; they would never vote SPD. Thus both Schneiders have a strong political attachment to the CDU and vote consistently for the party.

Their son Christian has a different view of politics. Both large parties look a bit old-fashioned in terms of their issues and political style. He sees the Greens as more attuned to his tastes. The Greens caution about the excess materialism of Germany (as represented by his parents' two Mercedes in the garage and vacations abroad); the party is concerned about global warming and other environmental issues; and the Greens are more socially tolerant. If the Pirate Party looked to do well in the 2013 elections, Christian might also support this party.

This generation gap in the Schneider family is a microcosm of the German electorate. Although they live in the same house and share most of the same social characteristics in terms of class and religion, these family members have substantially different images of parties and elections. The elder Schneiders think of politics in terms of class and religious cleavages, and are sceptical of political change; Christian is interested in specific issues that don't always fit these frameworks. The elder Schneiders have strong party attachments; Christian isn't 100 per cent loyal to any political party.

These same patterns can be seen in the German electorate as a whole. Where once a stable basis of party competition seemed to determine electoral outcomes, fewer people today seem to have firm party ties. The traditional bonds to social groups, such as class and religion, have eroded

over time. Certainly some voters remain connected to a social milieu or a habitual party tie, but the number of these voters has steadily decreased.

Instead of relying on such long-term party bonds, more Germans are entering each election without a certain party choice and are deciding their vote based on the issues and candidates of the campaign. This was clearly evident in recent Bundestag elections. All three minor parties – the FDP, the Greens and Linke – had record high vote shares in 2009 (while the SPD sank to a record low), though they lost many of these voters in 2013 (while the SPD rebounded, but only to its second worst showing in the history of the Federal Republic). Recent elections give increasing attention to the personalities of the chancellor candidates and other party leaders, perhaps stimulated by the importance of televised political debates. Issues such as global warming, immigrant populations, the EU and foreign policy motivate many people to change their vote between elections – the inter-election volatility of voting results seems to be increasing.

While these examples of electoral change have steadily developed in the West, a different situation exists in the East. Since unification Easterners have celebrated their new democratic freedoms and have exercised their new voting rights. Easterners' relatively recent introduction to democratic elections precludes the type of long-term party ties that guide some Western voters like the elder Schneiders. Similarly, the social and economic dislocations of German unification blurred the social cleavages that historically provided a framework for electoral politics in the West. In short, Easterners are developing their party preferences in this dynamic political environment. Thus in comparisons to Westerners, Easterners are even more changeable in electoral terms.

This chapter focuses on the electoral behaviour of the German public and examine the political differences between Westerners and Easterners. Elections are a useful setting to study political attitudes and behaviours because they require that people think about contemporary issues and make voting choices. During elections, citizens express their judgements about the past accomplishments of political parties and make choices about the future course of the nation. Elections also mobilize and display the political cleavages existing within a society. Thus, a study of voting behaviour can tell us a great deal about how citizens think about politics and the political legacy of Germany's divided history.

The chapter begins by describing the weakening of party bonds that led to the present period of more fluid electoral politics. Social cleavages and party attachments are two main factors that provide the enduring basis of party competition, and the chapter discusses how these social cues have changed as well. The role of issues and candidate images in guiding voting behavior is examined and in defining policy contrasts

between Easterners and Westerners. The final section, discusses the implications of these findings for the German party system and democratic process.

The erosion of traditional party loyalties

In the early history of the Federal Republic electoral research often viewed parties and elections in terms of relatively stable and enduring voting blocs. Parties normally build enduring alliances with social groups that share their political vision. Because of this, people use their social position or their judgements about the social group leanings of the parties as a guide to their voting choices. A Ruhr steelworker who votes for the Social Democrats, or a Bavarian Catholic who supports the Christian Social Union, is reflecting his or her own values as well as the political choices available at election time. Thus, social characteristics often provided a good way to describe differences in political values within a nation and the influence of alternative social networks on political behaviour.

Similarly, many people (like the elder Schneiders) develop long-term, affective attachments to a specific political party – often a party that represents their social milieu. Card-carrying SPD party members, for example, begin each election knowing who they will support, just as self-identified Christian Democrats habitually endorse the CDU/CSU. With continued support of their preferred party at successive elections, such affiliations strengthened during the early history of the Federal Republic. Each election typically pitted the same social groups and same partisan camps against one another, with most voters supporting the same party as in the previous electoral battle. Both of these factors – social group cleavages and party attachments – have weakened over the Republic's history.

The erosion of class influences

Social class differences were once central to the political identity and voter support of both the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Moreover, both parties were embedded in their own network of support groups (business associations and labour unions) and offered voters distinct political programmes catering to these group interests.

Despite the historical importance of the class cleavage, four decades of electoral results point to an unmistakable decline in class voting differences within the Federal Republic's party system (Knutsen, 2006 Elff and Roßteutscher, 2011; Dalton, 2013: ch. 8). At the height of class-based voting in 1957, the SPD received a majority of working-class votes (61 per

cent) but only a small share (24 per cent) of middle-class votes. This produced a 37 percentage point gap in the class bases of party support, rivalling the level of class voting found in other class-polarized party systems such as Britain or Sweden. Over the next two decades, the level of class voting steadily decreased in Germany as in most other advanced industrial democracies. By the 1980s, the percentage point gap in class voting averaged in the teens and this has continued to the present. In the Bundestag elections of the 2000s, working-class support for the Social Democrats barely exceeds its vote share among the middle class.

Class differences in voting patterns have narrowed for several reasons. In the most general terms, the expanding affluence and social security of post-war Germany lessened these social divisions. It is not that economic issues are unimportant, but they are now more complex and less clearly linked to occupational status. Furthermore, a host of new issues have entered the political agenda and compete for voters' interests and shape their votes in non-class ways. In addition, the changing structure of the economy has blurred the traditional divisions between the working class and middle class. The dramatic growth of a new middle class (*Neue Mittelstand*) of salaried employees and government workers produced a strata that differs in social position and political behaviour from the traditional middle class (the self-employed and professionals) and the working class. The new middle class now represents the large sector of the labour force, and in recent elections they have split their votes between left and right parties.

Voters still recognize these class cues; other evidence suggests that they are now better able to perceive the class ties of the parties. Economic and class issues are not less important: these issues still routinely dominate election campaigns. Rather, voters are not relying on social-class cues to make their choices as they once did.

The persisting impact of social class on voting choice is even more blurred for voters in the eastern *Länder*. In the first democratic elections in the early 1990s, it was difficult to apply Western notions of social class to a society that was in the midst of transition from socialism to capitalism. Moreover, the political ties between the parties and class-based interest groups in the East were equally unclear. Class voting patterns have thus fluctuated across elections since 1990. But the elections of the 2000s show a single digit gap in working/middle-class voting differences in the East.

In summary, while social class once was a potent cue in guiding the voting choices of many citizens, the impact of this cue has steadily eroded in the West. And the new voters in the East have not been integrated into this class voting structure, which further blurs the impact of social-class cues on contemporary German elections.

The erosion of religious influences

Historically, religion has also divided the political parties in the Federal Republic. Political debates on the separation of church and state, and persisting differences between Catholics and Protestants, had a formative influence on the party system. The CDU/CSU has tried to bridge the denominational divide. Still, Catholics and the religiously active of both denominations lean toward the CDU/CSU, while Protestants and the non-religious favour the SPD. Religion is often a silent issue in German politics, and occasionally becomes visible in conflicts over religious or moral issues, such as abortion, state support of church programmes and policies toward the family.

As a consequence of the communist era, religious ties are even weaker in the East. Although the German Democratic Republic accepted the existence of the Catholic and Protestant churches, they were under strict government control, which weakened religious ties. For instance, the 2006 World Values Survey found that 56 per cent of Westerners go to religious services at least once a year, compared to 32 per cent in the East; 60 per cent of Westerners consider themselves religious, but only 30 per cent of Easterners. In summary, the East is a much more secularized society, even though the West had experienced its own secularization trend. In addition, unification changed the religious balance of politics in the Federal Republic: Catholics and Protestants are roughly at parity in the West, while the East is heavily Protestant. Thus, unification significantly altered the religious composition of the new Germany.

This religious cleavage also follows a pattern of decline similar to the class cleavage. Changing lifestyles and religious beliefs have decreased involvement in church activities and diminished the church as a focus of social (and political) activities.

Those who are still centred in the class or religious milieus have distinct voting preferences (Elff and Roßteutscher, 2011). However, fewer people today fit the traditional bourgeois/proletariat class models and fewer are religious. . Thus, as the number of individuals relying on class or religious cues decreases, the partisan significance of these social characteristics and their overall ability to explain voting also decreases.

The weakening of party attachments

In addition to class and religious ties that are relevant to voting preferences, electoral research finds that people develop direct personal attachments to their preferred political party, which guides their voting and other aspects of political behaviour (Dalton, 2013: ch. 9). Researchers call this a sense of 'party identification'. Party identification is generally

socialized early in life, often as part of a family political inheritance or derived from social group cues, and then reinforced by adult voting patterns.

These party ties are important because they can structure a person's view of the political world, provide cues for judging political phenomena, influence patterns of political participation, and promote stability in individual voting behaviour. For instance, 80–90 per cent of partisans routinely support their preferred party at election time regardless of the candidates or the issues of the campaign. The concept of party identification has proven to be one of the most helpful ideas in understanding the political behaviour of contemporary electorates.

The Federal Republic has experienced two distinct phases in the development of party attachments. The stabilization and consolidation of the party system during the 1950s and 1960s strengthened popular attachments to the parties (Baker et al., 1981). In the late 1970s, however, this trend toward partisanship among Western voters slowed, and then reversed. Since 1972 surveys have asked a standard question: 'Many people in the Federal Republic lean toward a particular party for a long time, although they may occasionally vote for a different party. How about you: Do you in general lean toward a particular party? Which one? ' Figure 3.1 documents a growing number of Germans who do not feel attached to any political party. In 1972 only 25 per cent of citizens in the West lacked a party attachment; this grew slightly during the 1980s and then accelerated in the 1990s. Today, 40 per cent of Westerners lack party ties. Among partisans the strength of their attachments is also weakening. In addition, other studies find declining membership in political parties and a growing antipathy toward parties and the party system (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Dalton and Weldon, 2005). So there is broad evidence of declining party attachments and affect among the German public.

Several factors seem to account for this decline in partisanship. The weakening of the social bases of the parties – as represented by changes in class and religious voting – has also eroded voters' bonds to the parties. These social milieus once provided the foot soldiers for party politics, and there are now fewer recruits than in the past. In addition, social modernization has produced an increasingly diverse and fluid social structure, where hereditary party bonds seem anachronistic. People have become less loyal and deferential to political parties and other social and political institutions. One might claim this represents a performance deficit by German parties, the struggles of unification, or scandals over party and candidate finances which have tarnished party images. Many journalists and political experts criticize party politics for its shortcomings, which sends a negative message to the public. In addition, the growing sophistication of the Western electorate may contribute to the weakening of indi-

Figure 3.1   *The growing number of non-partisans*
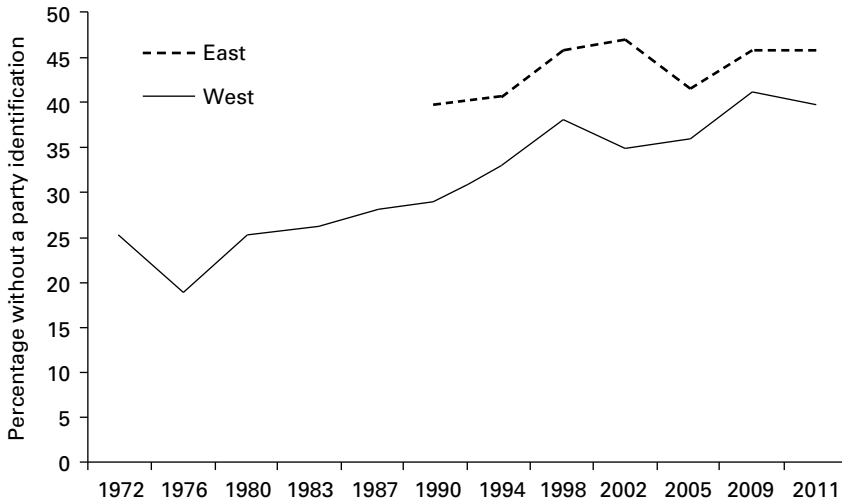
Note: Several pre-election and a post-election survey are included for most timepoints; the 2011 statistics are based on the September/October surveys.

Source: Surveys conducted by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen.

vidual party ties. Similar to the decline of partisanship in the United States, a significant share of younger, politically sophisticated and better educated Germans lack party ties (Dalton, 2012a; 2014). These same individuals are developing self-expressive and post-material values that foster doubts of institutions such as parties. Furthermore, as voters begin to focus on issues as a basis of electoral choice, they are more likely to defect from their normal party predispositions, which erodes these predispositions in general and makes further defections even more likely.

Party politics in the eastern *Länder* obviously followed a different course. Easterners began their democratic experiences in 1990, so few of them should (or could) display the deep affective partisan loyalties that constitute a sense of 'party identification' (Kaase and Klingemann, 1994). Although some research suggests that many Easterners had latent affinities for specific parties in the Federal Republic, these were not long-term attachments born of early life experiences that we normally equate with party identification. The tribulations of unification then strained many Easterners' opinions of the Federal Republic parties and politicians.

Regular measurement of partisan attachments did not begin in Eastern surveys until early 1991. By then, most voters had participated in two national elections (the March 1990 *Volkskammer* and the December

Bundestag elections) as well as regional and local contests. Still, in 1991 two-fifths lacked a party tie. And instead of increasing as people gained experience with the parties, Eastern partisanship remains weak. In 2005 and 2009 there are slightly more non-partisans than in 1991. In short, the first decades of democratic experience with the Federal Republic's party system has not developed partisan ties in the East.

So these trends describe a *dealignment* of the long-term attachments to political parties by a growing proportion of the German public. However, we can interpret these findings differently for the two regions. The decrease in partisanship among Westerners is similar to several other advanced industrial democracies, which suggests that Germany's special problems of unification may simply reinforce a general cross-national dealignment pattern.

In contrast, we might describe Easterners as a pre-aligned electorate. Democratic politics is still a learning experience for many Eastern voters. Party attachments normally strengthen through repeated electoral experiences, especially in newly formed party systems. Thus, the current situation in the East might be closer to the Federal Republic in the immediate post-war period. The partisan attachments of Easterners should strengthen over time, but the dealigning forces of contemporary politics seem to be countering the learning process.

From habituation to voter choice

Although many voters continue to support the same party from election to election, social and partisan dealignment is increasing the fluidity of electoral choice. One sign is the expansion of the party system. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the party system was characterized by a fairly stable pattern of party competition between the CDU/CSU, the SPD and the FDP (see Chapter 4). In the 1980s, the Greens and the issues they espoused introduced new political choices and new volatility in the electoral process. Unification has continued this process, with the introduction of the PDS and its evolution into Die Linke. In the 2013 Bundestagswahl the new Alliance for Germany fell only 0.3 per cent below the threshold for winning seats in parliament; the Pirate Party won seats in four state legislatures during the 2009–13 period. These are signs that the electorate is placing less reliance on the stable social and partisan cues that once guided their behaviour.

Evidence of this shift from habituation to voter choice is apparent in a variety of statistics (Schoen, 2004; Wessels, 2009). For instance, in the early 1970s barely 10 per cent of voters reported switching their party choice between elections (see Figure 3.2). This pattern of electoral stabil-

Figure 3.2   *Indications of increasing fluidity of voting choice*
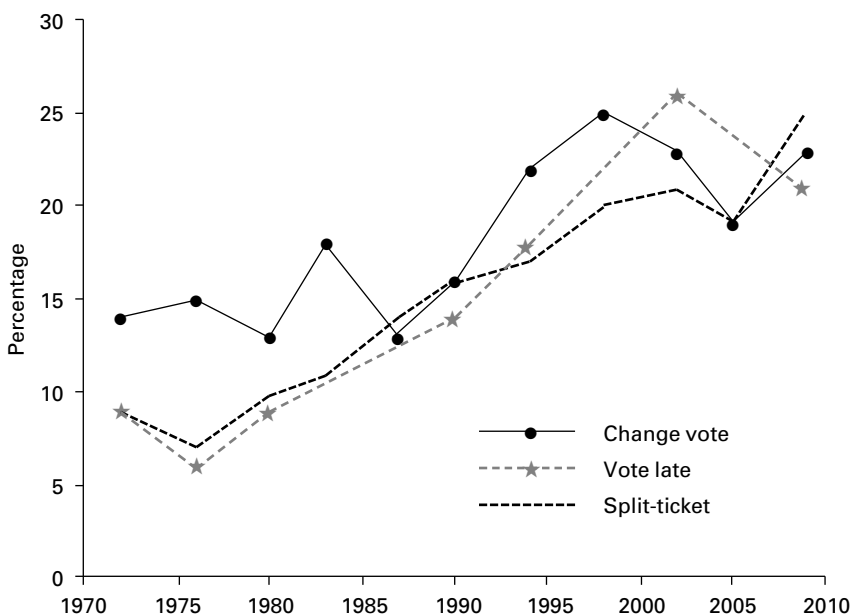
ity changed in the 1980s, during which elections were characterized by intense political and personal rivalries between the parties. By the end of the 1990s, nearly a quarter of the Western electorate reports they switched votes. The recent Bundestag elections highlighted this volatility, with virtually all the parties experiencing large shifts in their vote shares. According to the 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study, 23 per cent of Westerners and 26 per cent of Easterners reported shifting their votes since the 2005 election. This is relatively high for a parliamentary electoral system. Moreover, because these figures are based on recollection of previous voting, these statistics probably underestimate the actually amount of vote switching.

Split-ticket voting is another possible indicator of the rigidity of party commitments. When Germans go to the polls they cast two votes. The first vote (*Erstimme*) is for a candidate to represent the electoral district; the second vote (*Zweitstimme*) is for a party list that provides the basis for a proportional allocation of parliamentary seats. A voter may therefore split his or her ballot by selecting a district candidate of one party with the first vote and another party with the party-list vote.

The amount of split-ticket voting has also inched upward over time (Schoen, 2000). At the start of the 1970s, less than 10 per cent of all voters

split their ballots (see Figure 3.2). The proportion of splitters increased in the 1980s, and by the 1990s a sixth of voters claimed to cast a split ballot. In 2009 this reached 25 per cent among Westerners, and 18 per cent in the East. The growth of split-ticket voting partially reflects the increased strength of minor parties that siphon off second votes from the major parties. In addition, split-ticket voting exemplifies the increasing fluidity of contemporary voting choices.

Another sign of the changing pattern of electoral choice is the timing of voting decisions (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, ch. 3). Most Germans once began election campaigns with strong predispositions to support their preferred party, based on enduring social cues and affective party attachments. But as these predispositions weaken, more voters should be making their decisions on the issues and candidates of the campaign, and thus making their decisions later in the election cycle. If this is correct, fewer voters will say that they decided how to vote before the campaign, and more will claim that they decided during the campaign or even on election day itself.

Figure 3.2 indicates that an increasing percentage of Western voters say they are making their decision during the last few weeks of the campaign. The percentage of self-defined late deciders has doubled over time, from less than a tenth of the electorate in the 1960s to nearly a fifth in the 1990s. In the 2009 election, 24 per cent of Westerners said they decided during the last few weeks of the campaign, as did 24 per cent of Easterners. Three days before the 2013 election, the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen reported that 32 per cent of Germans were unsure of which party they would support.

In summary, fewer Germans are approaching each election with their decision already made. This volatility is even more clearly apparent among those who lack a party attachment. Instead of habitual or inherited party preferences, or those directed by external group cues, more voters are apparently making their decisions based on the content of the campaign and the offerings of the parties. In analysing those who switched their vote in 2002 and 2005, Bernard Wessels (2009: 413–14) concludes that voter shifts are motivated by legitimate political evaluations, rather than random fluctuations. Electoral politics is shifting from habituation to voter choice.

The changing basis of electoral choice

If the long-term sources of voting choice are weakening in influence, this raises the question of what factors people now use to make their choices. Inevitably, the erosion of social group and partisanship cues must lead to

increased reliance on shorter-term factors, such as the issues and candidates of each campaign. Moreover, the evidence of increased party switching between elections suggests that such short-term factors are having an increasing weight on voter choice.

I will focus on the 2005 and 2009 Bundestag elections because the necessary public opinion surveys are available for analysis. These elections also illustrate the current state of the German party system. In 2005 the economy was stagnating despite the economic reforms of the Schröder government (Langenbacher, 2007; Clemens and Saalfeld, 2008; Gabriel et al., 2009). Schröder called for early elections as a mandate for his administration, and Angela Merkel led the challenge from a reinvigorated CDU/CSU. The election ended as a dead heat between the CDU/CSU and SPD – and both Merkel and Schröder declared victory. After weeks of negotiation and the exploration of potential coalitions, the CDU/CSU and a Schröder-less SPD agreed to form a 'grand coalition'.

The 2009 election reflected the tensions produced by four years of the grand coalition (Langenbacher, 2010; Rohrschneider, 2012). The CDU/CSU and SPD struggled to agree on reform policies to continue the upward economic trends, but little significant legislation was produced. When the global recession struck in late 2008, the parties struggled even more over how to react to the declines. This odd political marriage provided the backdrop for the 2009 elections, with the chancellor (CDU) and vice chancellor (SPD) now running against each other. The Social Democrats seemed to suffer most from the government's mixed policy record. Their traditional voters held them accountable for the government's failures, but gave them little credit for its successes. Conversely, Merkel and the CDU/CSU seemed to benefit more from the government's successes than its failure. Merkel emerged from the election as the head of a new coalition government of Christian Democrats and Free Democrats. The Social Democrats suffered their worst electoral showing in the history of the Federal Republic, as leftist voters deserted them for the Linke Party or the Greens. Indeed, all three minor parties – the Free Democrats, Die Linke and the Greens – recorded their highest vote shares ever, another rebuke of the grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats.

The 2013 election saw a reversal of this trend towards minor party voting. The CDU/CSU benefited from voter confidence about the performance of the German economy, as well as Merkel's personal popularity, polling its highest vote in almost 20 years. Their success squeezed the minor parties, especially the FDP which failed to achieve the 5 per cent required to enter the Bundestag. The end result was an indecisive election, with prolonged negotiations eventually leading to a grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD.

In this section I examine various potential causes of citizen voting deci-sions. I begin by describing variations in social group support of the parties, then expand to describe the impact of political criteria, such as left–right attitudes, as correlates of the vote, before I summarize the weight of the various factors that affect how Germans make their party choices.

The social bases of the vote

Democratic elections are about making policy choices about a future government, and Germans have a rich set of parties and policy programmes from which to choose. As discussed above, factors such as class and religion have historically provided an organizational base for German parties and are a key source of party members and voters. In addition, other social characteristics – such as gender, region and genera-tion – can influence how voters make their choices (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2013). The voting patterns of social groups also reflect the ideo-logical and policy differences among the parties.

Using reports published right after the September 2013 election, we can describe social differences in voting in 2013 before shifting to more detailed analyses of the 2005 and 2009 elections. Table 3.1 shows that party support still somewhat reflects the traditional social divisions in German society. The CDU/CSU primarily draws its voters from the conservative sectors of society, with greater support from older people, retirees and the middle class. For example, 48 per cent of the self-employed voted CDU/CSU, compared to only 38 per cent among blue-collar workers. Other studies show that Catholics and those who attend church disproportionately support the party.

The SPD's voter base contrasts with that of the CDU/CSU: a dispro-portionate share of SPD votes comes from blue-collar workers, although middle-class citizens provide most of the party's voters. In some ways, the SPD has suffered because its traditional working-class-voter base has declined in size and it has not established a new political identity that draws a distinct voter clientele.

The Greens' electoral base is heavily drawn from groups that support 'new politics' movements: the middle class, the better educated, and urban voters. Despite the party turning 30 years old in 2010, it still appeals to the young, especially university-educated youth. In 2013 they garnered 11 per cent of the vote from those under 30, but only 5 per cent of the vote from senior citizens.

Die Linke also has a distinct voter base. This is first an East-oriented party, with about a third of its total vote in 2013 coming from there. The party's leftist roots also appear in its appeal to blue-collar workers and the

Table 3.1   *Voting by social characteristics in 2013 (%)*

	CDU/CSU	SPD	Greens	Linke	FDP	AfD	Other
Election result	41.5	25.7	8.4	8.6	4.8	4.7	6.1
Region							
West	42	27	9	6	5	4	6
East	39	17	5	23	3	6	7
Employment status							
Employed	40	26	10	8	5	5	7
Unemployed	22	25	10	21	2	7	13
Retired	48	29	5	9	4	4	1
Occupation							
Self-employed	48	15	10	7	10	6	4
Salaried employees	41	26	10	8	5	5	5
Civil servants	44	25	13	5	6	5	2
Blue-collar worker	38	30	5	11	3	5	8
Education							
Primary education	46	30	4	7	3	3	7
Secondary schooling	43	25	6	10	4	6	6
Abitur	39	24	12	8	5	5	7
University degree	37	23	15	9	7	5	4
Age							
Under 30	34	24	11	8	5	6	12
30–44	41	22	10	8	5	5	9
45–59	39	27	10	9	5	5	5
60 and older	49	28	5	8	5	4	1
Gender							
Men	39	27	8	8	4	6	7
Women	44	24	10	8	5	4	6

Notes: N = 1,572; some percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Source: September 2013 Politibarometer Survey, Forschungsgruppe Wahlen.

unemployed. It is a party for those frustrated with the economic and political path Germany has followed since unification.

The FDP voters include a high percentage of the middle class, both white-collar employees and the self-employed. While the Greens attract liberal, educated youth, the FDP attracts a disproportionate share of young, better-educated conservatives. But squeezed on the left and right by other parties, the FDP's lack of a clear identity contributed to their failings in 2013.

The new contender in 2013 was the Alliance for Democracy. The party's criticism of the EU's policies and the costs of Germany's contribution to the EU were the basis of its appeal to voters. This position

resonated among retirees on fixed income, Easterners, and among some youth. The AfD voter base suggests it drew support away from parties on both the left and right.

As noted above, these social group differences have generally narrowed over time, as fewer voters make their decisions based on class, religion or other cues. Yet, the ideology and clientele networks of the parties still reflect these traditional group bases, so they have a persisting but modest influence on voting choices.

Ideology and the vote

Issue positions are the currency of politics, and the choice of parties or the choice of governments is closely linked to the policies they will enact. Each campaign, however, has its own set of issues that reflect the political controversies of the day and the parties' choices about what themes to stress in their campaigns. Economics, unemployment and finance dominated the 2005 election; by 2009 unemployment, the global recession and the international financial system framed the campaign debate, and these issues continued to dominate the agenda in 2013. At the same time, other voters were motivated by issues such as environmental quality, minority rights and EU relations.

This shift in issue agendas makes it difficult to compare issue voting over time, because the issues themselves are changing as well as party positions. Moreover, we are more interested in the total impact of issues, rather than the specific set of issues that have affected each Bundestagswahl because issues inevitably change between elections.

Therefore I will illustrate the general influence of issue preferences on voting by examining the relationship between left–right attitudes and how people vote (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Dalton, 2013: ch. 10). Left–right attitudes are a sort of 'super issue', summarizing positions on the issues that are currently most important to each voter. For some voters, their left–right position may be derived from views on traditional economic conflicts; for others, their position may reflect their stance on issues such immigrant rights or gender issues. The concerns of German unification or responses to the 2008 crisis of the monetary system can also be translated into a left–right framework. Specific issues might vary across individuals or across elections, but left–right attitudes can summarize each citizen's overall policy views.

Table 3.2 displays the relationship between left–right attitudes and party choice in the 2013 election for voters in both the West and East. In both regions there was a very close fit between left–right position and vote. Die Linke, for example, received disproportionate support from leftist voters, especially in the East where it was 63 per cent. In contrast,

Table 3.2 *Left/Right Attitudes and Party Support (in percent)*

	Left	*Center-Left*	*Center*	*Center-Right*	*Right*
Western voters					
Linke	36	15	2	0	0
Greens	18	26	12	1	0
SPD	33	40	32	6	17
FDP	0	1	8	7	17
CDU/CSU	3	9	40	83	61
Other parties	9	9	5	3	6
Total	99%	100%	99%	100%	101%
(Percent of voters)	(4)	(20)	(60)	(14)	(2)
Eastern voters					
Linke	63	35	6	0	–
Greens	11	11	7	0	–
SPD	17	30	20	5	–
FDP	0	1	13	10	–
CDU/CSU	6	21	60	71	–
Other parties	3	3	3	14	–
Total	100%	101%	99%	100%	
(Percent of voters)	(8)	(32)	(54)	(5)	(1)

Source: 2013 German Longitudinal Election Study: Pre-election survey (not including Berlin). Missing data for far right in East is because of very small number of respondents.

few people on the right side of the political spectrum support Die Linke in either region. The Greens are also a predominantly leftist party, with a cultural and social appeal that is noticeably stronger in the West.

The ideological basis of support for the two large established parties is also clearly apparent in Table 3.2. The SPD again had a relatively poor showing in 2013, and this is apparent in its second place showing for far-left voters in both regions. In both regions the Social Democrats vote also erodes as one moves right. The CDU/CSU's voting base presents a mirror image: more than two-thirds of conservative voters support the Union parties, and this steadily declines as one moves left. In both regions there is more than a 60 per cent gap in CDU/CSU support between the most left-wing and most right-wing voters. Finally, as a party standing between the two large established parties, the Free Democrats garner most of their support from people who are just right of centre.

Table 3.2 thus indicates that left–right attitudes, and thereby the specific policy issues that define 'left' and 'right', have a very strong relationship to party preferences as they have in other recent elections. The relationship between left and right and who is voted for is noticeably

stronger than the social differences in voting reported in Table 3.1. Research points to the increasing impact of issues and to left–right attitudes over time as voters focus more on what candidates and parties are emphasizing in each election (Roßteutscher and Scherer, 2012). This is one consequence of the shift from stable voting dispositions to more fluid party choice.

Candidate voting

In addition to issue voting, candidate preferences also affect citizens' voting choices. Since the German ballot is divided between a district candidate vote and a party vote, one might assume that candidate voting was always part of the electoral calculus. However, early voting studies found that many people were unaware of the candidates running in their district, and cast their candidate vote as a simple extension of their party preference. Moreover, since the Chancellor was selected by the parties in the Bundestagswahl, the image of the Chancellor candidates played a smaller role in Bundestag elections than in the candidate-centred direct elections of US or French presidents.

As voting choice has become more fluid, there is some evidence that the importance of candidate image has increased. First, party and candidate preferences are not as closely related as they were in the past (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000: 53). Second, images of the Chancellor candidates appear to be increasingly related to party choice (Ohr, 2000; Brettschneider, 2001). German Chancellor candidates have turned to television to personalize the campaigns, arranging events for their video appeal and using televised town hall meetings to connect directly with citizens. The growing reliance on private television broadcasting has further accelerated these trends. In the 2002 contest, all the party leaders played a prominent role in party campaign advertising – the Schröder/Stoiber TV duel focused attention on the two Chancellor candidates. Because of the centrality of these candidates one leading political analyst called 2002 the first 'presidential election' in Germany. The Schröder/Merkel debate was also a critical point in the 2005 election; and candidate debates figured prominently in 2009. However, there was only one debate between Merkel and Steinbrück in 2013.

Electoral researchers debate the content of candidate images and thus their implications in predicting voting choices. In addition, there are complex methodological issues involved in measuring the impact of candidate images and separating their effects from party loyalties. Still, as fewer people enter elections with a predetermined party commitment, it seems inevitable that candidate images will gradually become more important in voting choices.

Combining explanations

When all of these potential causal factors – long-term and short-term – come together, they structure the voting choice of Germans. Some people take party cues from social groups, others vote out of habitual party loyalty, and some weigh the candidates and issues of the campaign. Many voters take all these factors into account. The weight of each factor may change from election to election, depending on the salience of issues or the characteristics of the party leaders in each campaign. No single factor solely determines the vote, which rather comes from a mix of factors.

The composition of the mix is illustrated in Figures 3.3 and 3.4 that display the impact of party sympathy, Chancellor candidate preferences, and left–right attitudes on voting choice in the West and East for the 2005 and 2009 elections. This is a simple model compared to the current state

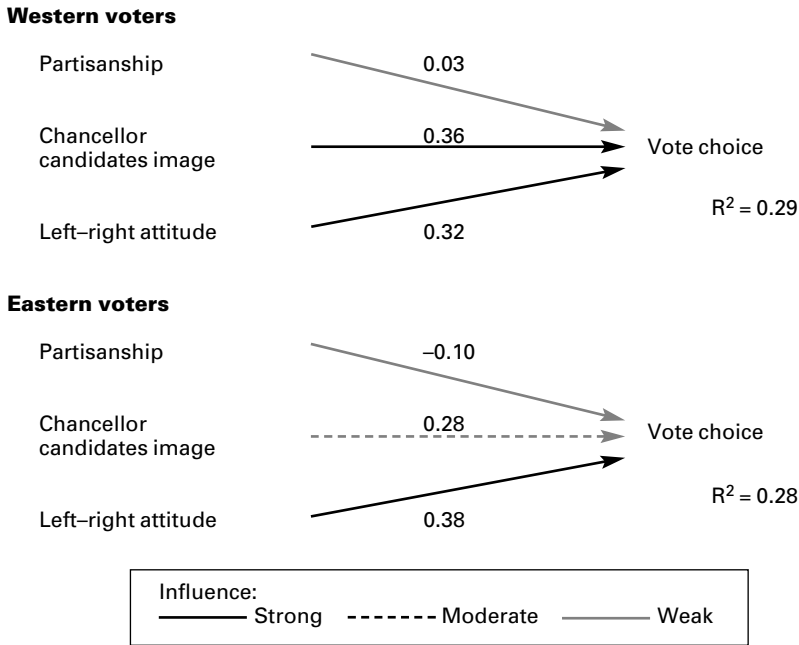**Figure 3.3**   *Factors affecting voting preferences in 2005*
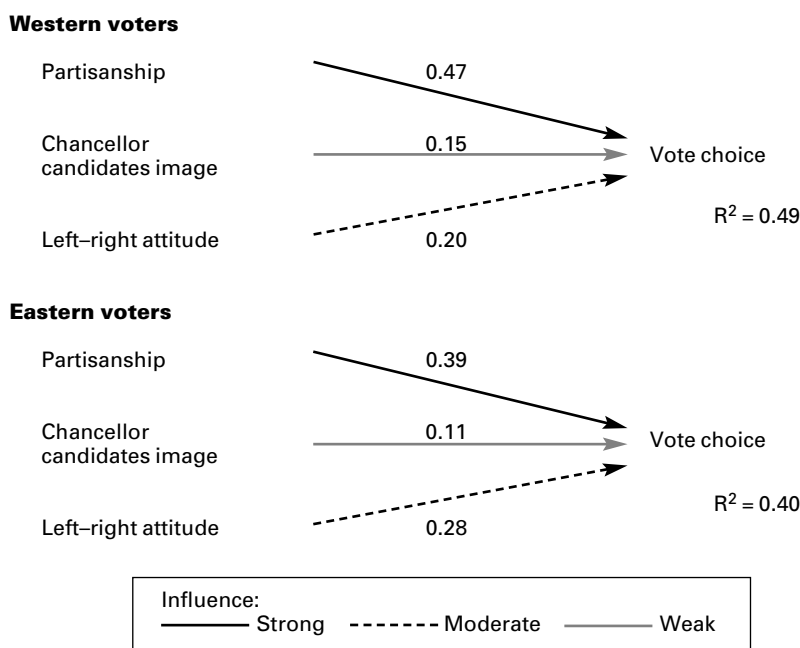
Notes: Figure entries are standardized regression coefficients. Vote choice is coded (1) PDS/Die Linke, (2) Greens, (3) SPD, (4) FDP, (5) CDU/CSU. Partisanship is measured by the difference between SPD and CDU/CSU sympathy ratings; candidate image is the difference between Merkl and Schröder sympathy ratings; and left–right attitudes are the respondents' position on an 11 point scale.

Source: 2005 German Election Study, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin.

Figure 3.4 *Factors affecting voting preferences in 2009*

Western voters

Partisanship 0.03

Chancellor candidates image 0.36 Vote choice

Left–right attitude 0.32 $R^2 = 0.29$

Eastern voters

Partisanship −0.10

Chancellor candidates image 0.28 Vote choice

Left–right attitude 0.38 $R^2 = 0.28$

Influence:
——— Strong - - - - - - - Moderate ——— Weak

Notes: Figure entries are standardized regression coefficients. Vote choice is coded (1) Die Linke, (2) Greens, (3) SPD, (4) FDP, (5) CDU/CSU. Partisanship is measured by the difference between SPD and CDU/CSU sympathy ratings; candidate image is the difference between Merkl and Steinmaier sympathy ratings; and left–right attitudes are the respondents' position on an 11 point scale.

Source: 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study.

of electoral research (Gabriel et al., 2009; Wessels et al., 2012), but it reflects some broad patterns that are generally seen in voting studies. The coefficients in the figure represent the influence of each factor while statistically controlling for the effect of the other factors.

Despite the dealignment trend described above, images of the major parties still weighs heavily on the vote choice in 2005, with slightly stronger effects in the West where party ties are stronger (see Figure 3.3). Sympathy towards the CDU/CSU versus the SPD is the strongest single correlate of vote choice in both West and East, and we should expect that those with partisan ties generally follow them at election time. Candidate image – the difference is the affective ratings of Merkel and Schröder – also had a significant impact as the two candidates represented sharply different policies and leadership styles. We expect that the role of candidate images will vary across elections, depending on the popularity of

both candidates and the polarization in public opinion toward them. Left–right attitudes, and the issue positions represented by this super issue, also have a significant role in both regions, but with somewhat stronger effects in the East. In replicating this model over several elections in earlier editions of this book, we find there is a general tendency for the Eastern electorate to place more weight on left–right positions in making their voting choices, perhaps because their life conditions are more dependent on post-unification policies and they are less likely to have firm party attachments.

The electoral calculus changed significantly in 2009. The grand coalition blurred public images of the SPD and CDU/CSU that shared control of the government, and placed all the minor parties (both liberal and conservative) in opposition together. So the marked difference in 2009 was the virtual absence of differences in affect towards the SPD and CDU/CSU for predicting voting preferences. Instead, voters place more weight on both candidate images and left–right attitudes in making their voting choices. And again, Easterners place slightly more weight on left–right attitudes than Westerners. The 2009 election was exceptional because of the grand coalition, and one would expect the correlates of vote choice in 2013 to look more similar to the 2005 contest.

The two German electorates

This chapter has highlighted two broad characteristics of electoral politics in contemporary Germany. First, the country has been experiencing a gradual process of party dealignment. For the past three decades, long-term sources of voting choice have diminished in influence among voters in the West. Social class, religion, residence and other social characteristics have a declining impact on voting behaviour. Similarly, a dealignment trend signals a decreasing influence of party loyalties on voting decisions. Fewer Westerners now approach elections with fixed party ties based either on social characteristics or early learned partisan ties. It is not that voters lack partisan leanings, but that the nature of these predispositions are shifting from *strong ties* (group and party attachments) to *weak ties* (issues, candidate images and perceptions of party performance). Much like the findings of American or British electorate research, this erosion in the traditional bases of partisan support has occurred without producing new, enduring bases of support that might revitalize the party system (e.g. Rose and McAllister, 1989; Wattenberg, 1996). Indeed, the lack of a new stable alignment appears to be one of the distinctive features of contemporary party systems.

Citizens in the five new *Länder*, of course, have a much different electoral history. Rather than an erosion of previous social and partisan ties,

the Eastern electorate is still learning about democratic politics and the rough-and-tumble life of partisan campaigns. They understandably began this experience with weaker party ties and less certainty about the general structure of political competition. It was uncertain whether they would quickly adapt to the political structures of the West, or remain weakly tied to the party system. Party bonds have not strengthened in the two decades since unification.

The modest impact of long-term determinants of party choice is likely to strengthen the role that policy preferences play in electoral choices. Although most people still habitually support a preferred party, the tentativeness of these bonds will increase the potential that a particular issue or election campaign may sway their voting choice, at least temporarily. More and more, the specific issues of an election will influence voter choices, as a large group of floating voters react to the political stimuli of the election campaign. There is even some evidence that candidate images are a growing factor in voters' decision-making, especially among Easterners. This shift toward issue-based voting is likely to make policy considerations a more important aspect of elections while injecting considerable fluidity into electoral politics – at least until (if ever) a new stable group basis of party support forms.

A second implication of our findings concerns the contrasts between Western and Eastern Germans. There are two distinct electorates within the one German nation, the most distinctive evidence being the sharply different religious preferences. The Western electorate is relatively religious, as well as conservative on economic and social welfare issues; the Eastern electorate is secular and liberal on social issues. In addition, Easterners are more likely to describe themselves as left wing on the left–right scale to a greater extent than Westerners. If the 2009 election had occurred only in the East, for example, the SPD and Die Linke would have won a majority; if we look only at the electorate of the West, the CDU/CSU and FDP majority would have been even larger.

The specific concerns of Easterners and frustrations with the two large governing parties undoubtedly contributed to Die Linke's (formerly the PDS's) success as spokesperson for the disenfranchised East. In 2009 and 2013 Die Linke even displaced the SPD as the largest party in the Eastern states. In contrast, the Social Democrats are the main leftist party in the West. The other minor parties are also developing distinct regional clienteles. The Greens split the leftist vote with the SPD and Die Linke in the West, but have limited appeal to Eastern voters. The Free Democrats appear distinctly more attractive to Westerners. And while the CDU/CSU now seem to draw roughly equivalent support in West and East, the social bases of this support differs.

Regional differences in the patterns of party support can create intra-party tensions. For instance, because CDU voters in the new *Länder* are significantly less religious and less Catholic than their Western counterparts, their attitudes toward abortion and other social issues conflict with the policy programme of the Western CDU. If CDU politicians from the East represent these views, it creates a tension with the party's official policies. If Eastern CDU deputies do not reflect these views, then this produces a representation deficit for Easterners. The SPD and the other parties face similar problems in representing contrasting constituencies in West and East. Thus, the complex relationship amongst horizontal integrations with the national party elite, and the vertical integration between party elites and their social constituencies, has been unbalanced by German unification.

Taken together, these patterns of partisan fluidity and contrasting political alignments across regions do not lend themselves to a simple prediction of the future of the party system. An already complex situation in the 1980s has become even more complex since unification. And dealignment opens the door to new political challengers, such as the AfD or Pirate Party. It appears that electoral politics will be characterized by continued diversity in voting patterns. A system of frozen social cleavages and stable party alignments is less likely to develop in a society where voters are sophisticated, political interests are diverse, and individual choice is given greater latitude. Even the new political conflicts that are competing for the public's attention seem destined to create additional sources of partisan change rather than recreate the stable electoral structure of the past. This diversity and fluidity may, in fact, be the enduring new characteristic of the electoral politics of Germany and other advanced industrial societies.

Note

The survey data utilized in this chapter were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research in Ann Arbor, the GESIS archive in Cologne, and the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen in Mannheim. Neither the archives nor the original collectors of the data bear responsibility for the analyses presented here.