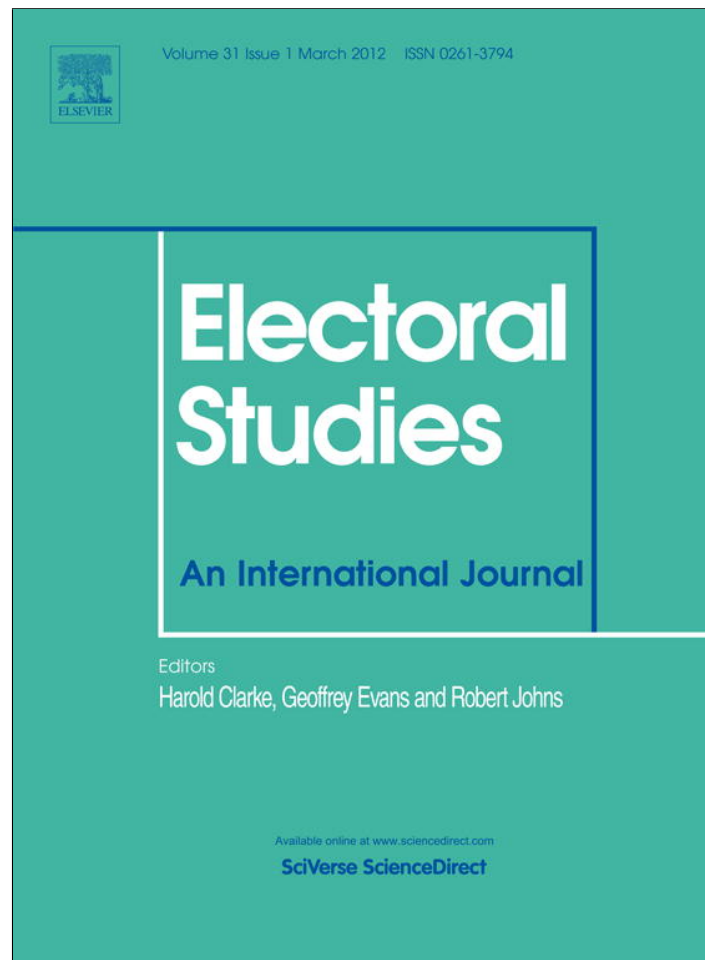


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## Apartisans and the changing German electorate<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of party identification is central to our understanding of electoral behavior. This paper builds upon the functional logic of party identification and asks what occurs when more Germans manage the complexities of politics without needing to rely on habitual party cues—what we label as Apartisans. We track the distribution of party mobilization and cognitive mobilization within the German electorate from 1976 until 2009. Then, we demonstrate the importance of these mobilization patterns by documenting strong differences in electoral commitment, the content of political thinking, and electoral change. The results suggest a secular transformation in the characteristics of the public has led to a more differentiated and dealigned German electorate.

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Samuel Barnes once said that the only constant in electoral research is that things change. The 2009 Bundestagswahl is an ideal example of this maxim. Even though the eventual outcome – a governing coalition between the CDU/CSU and FDP – seemed predictable at the outset of the campaign, getting to this point was a very dynamic process. The Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats saw their vote shares drop substantially, while all of the three minor parties gained historic highs in their percentages of the vote. And even the predictable outcome represented a change in the governing coalition.

The 2009 election thus seems to illustrate the continuing dealignment and volatility of the German party system. The traditional social strata that once provided a firm electoral base for the parties have decreased in size and electoral impact. Prior research has demonstrated a slow, steady erosion in Germans' attachments to political parties (Wessels, 2009; Arzheimer, 2006). This leads to

expectations that issues and candidates will play a greater role in electoral choice (see, e.g., Rohrschneider, Schmitt-Beck and Jung, this symposium). Instead of entering the elections with strong voting predispositions, there is evidence that voters are making decisions later in the campaign which is another sign of weakening party bonds (Dalton and Bürklin, 2003). Indeed, an increasing percentage of the public is switching party choices between elections (Wessels 2009; Schoen 2004)—and this pattern has continued to 2009. All of these indicators point to the weakening of party bonds and the increasing fluidity of German electoral politics over recent decades.

Moreover, these trends are not unique to the Federal Republic; similar trends are apparent in many other advanced industrial democracies (Clarke and Stewart, 1998; Dalton, 2000; Thomassen, 2005; McAllister, 2011, ch. 3). Many factors contribute to this trend, including changes in the media context, social mobility that erodes group identities, and the increasing complexity of social and political life. We further argue that people are themselves changing in ways that reflect and accentuate these social trends. Consequently, to understand these current processes of political change, we need to disaggregate our overall models of electoral behavior and recognize the divergent cognitive resources that citizens now utilize in guiding their behavior.

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Such differentiation will better allow us to understand which voters are changing between elections, producing the volatility noted in 2009, and what factors motivate change among different subgroups of the public.

Long-term affective partisanship can act as a heuristic for some voters with limited political sophistication. However, the increasing cognitive mobilization of the German electorate (and other democratic publics) produces a significant number of citizens who no longer rely on inherited, habitual party cues. Using longitudinal data series, we demonstrate that social change has significantly increased the percentage of these cognitively mobilized independent among the contemporary public. To the extent possible, our analyses parallel research on these same trends in the United States (Dalton, 2007, *in press*); this allows us to compare patterns between the more complex and candidate-centered American electoral system and the more party-centered German electoral system. We then show the impact of these mobilization patterns on political evaluations and behavior. The results, we argue, have fundamental implications for our understanding of political behavior in Germany and other advanced industrial democracies.

### 1. Party mobilization and cognitive mobilization

Although not initially framed in terms of cognitive theory and heuristics, the concept of partisan identification was built upon a functional model. At the time of *The American Voter*, most evidence pointed to the limited political skills and resources of the average citizen (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). Politics was remote to many individuals, and even access to political information was limited. Indeed, these constraints were one reason why early electoral scholars were so critical about the conceptual abilities of the overall electorate.

The concept of party identification offered an explanation of how many less-sophisticated individuals managed the complexities of democratic politics. Without explicitly using the term, researchers described partisanship as a heuristic for organizing political information, evaluations and behaviors. The authors of *The American Voter* described partisanship as a “perceptual screen” through which individuals interpret and evaluate political experiences. Borre and Katz (1973: 79–85) spoke quite directly about the functional value of partisanship as a political guide. This cue-giving function of partisanship is strongest for voting behavior, because this involves making explicit partisan choices. However, party attachments are relevant to a broad range of political phenomena because parties are so central to the political process and discussions of issues and political events. In summary, partisan cues are an efficient heuristic because they enable people to use their partisan identities to decide what policies and candidates “people like themselves” support and then to translate this into political action.

Party identifiers also included a group of sophisticated citizens who gravitated to a party consistent with their views, and strongly supported this party with a knowledgeable understanding of politics. For these individuals partisanship was accompanied by higher levels of political sophistication and engagement, rather than a simple, habitual heuristic. The

concept of partisanship, of both types, thus became a standard variable in electoral studies across the established democracies (Miller, 1991; Holmberg, 1994; Berglund et al., 2005).

Because of their image of the benefits of partisanship, electoral researchers have been generally skeptical of those who lacked partisan ties. Non-partisans typically had lower levels of political interest and sophistication (Campbell et al., 1960). They often lacked the knowledge or cues to make ‘rational’ electoral choices. Analysts saw independents as existing at the edge of electoral politics. In contrast to the idealized image of the political independent in democratic theory, empirical research viewed most independents as poor participants in electoral politics and the democratic process.

This model of partisanship and its positive consequences led research on postwar German electoral behavior to track the development of partisan ties among a newly democratic German electorate (Baker et al., 1981). The apparent growth of affective partisan ties up until the early 1970s was thus seen as a positive development for German democracy, and social learning theory predicted that these bonds would strengthen (Converse, 1969).

Just as scholars observed this development of German partisanship, there was a trend reversal. Starting from the mid-1970s, partisanship weakened among the German public (Dalton, 2000; Arzheimer, 2006; Ohr et al., 2009). In the 1972 election, for instance, 75 percent of the electorate felt an attachment to their preferred party. By 1990 this group of partisans amounted to 71 percent of the public, and by 2005 to 67 percent of the western public. In 1972 a majority expressed strong party ties (55 percent), by 2005 only a third of Westerners express such strong party bonds (37 percent). In the East, partisan ties were understandably weak immediately after unification as these new citizens learned the party system and electoral politics of the Federal Republic. But these bonds have not significantly increased in the subsequent two decades. Even by 2005, only 30 percent of Easterners claimed to hold “very strong” or “strong” party ties, and two-fifths of the public (41 percent) were explicitly non-partisan.

The traditional party identification model would see this decline of partisanship as a negative development for German politics because of the negative characteristics of independents. Indeed, turnout has trended downward during this period, as well as party membership. Similarly, other data point to decreasing trust in political parties and elected politicians—and increasing media reports critical of the parties (Kepplinger, 1996). Thus, dealignment might be interpreted as a sign of spreading public disengagement with politics, perhaps in reaction to a series of political controversies in the 1980s, the strains of unification, and repeated exposes on party corruption.

However, an alternative interpretation of these trends leads to a more sanguine conclusion. The tremendous socio-economic changes in the Federal Republic over the past several decades—the expansion of education, access to political information and interest in politics—have increased the *cognitive mobilization* of the German public (Dalton and Rohrschneider, 1990; Inglehart, 1990, ch. 10; Dalton, 2000). Cognitive mobilization means that more people now possess the political resources and skills that

better prepare them to deal with the complexities of politics and reach their own political decisions without reliance on affective, habitual party loyalties or other external cues.

Cognitive mobilization involves several interrelated developments. The public's ability to process political information has increased, as a function of higher levels of education and political sophistication among the electorate. For instance, in the 1961 Bundestagswahl only about 10 percent of the electorate had a middle school degree (*Realschulabschluss, Mittlere Reife, Abitur*, etc.); in 2009 this had increased to almost 60 percent. While there is not a one-to-one relationship between education and political sophistication, this tremendous increase in educational levels should increase the political skills and resources of the average citizen. A wide range of studies illustrates how education improves the breadth and/or depth of the public's cognitive skills and understanding (Milner, 2002; Nie et al., 1996; Popkin, 1991). Electoral research in the United States has long shown that the better educated are also more likely to vote on the basis of issues, while less educated turn to other heuristics (Sniderman et al., 1991; Stimson, 1975).

Similarly, access to information resources and other prerequisites for informed democratic citizenship have grown by equal measure as Germany has become a more cosmopolitan, advanced industrial, information-based society. The relatively closed media environment of earlier decades has been replaced by globalized information networks from cable television and the Internet. Higher education levels also increase the ability of the average citizen to assimilate and utilize this information. Moreover, it is important that these civic skills—represented by education—are combined with a motivation to apply these skills to politics—represented by political interest. If citizens focus their skills on other life domains, then the impact of increasing cognitive mobilization on politics will be limited. *If these traits are combined*, this can produce groups of citizens that can have the ability and motivation to understand the world of politics.

In other words, the cognitive mobilization of the public, in combination with other social forces, may have changed the calculus of partisanship for some citizens. More Germans now possess the political resources and skills that prepare them to deal with the complexities of politics and reach their own political decisions without reliance on party loyalties or other external cues. In addition, growing skepticism of political institutions and a rise of self-expressive values may lessen the likelihood that cognitively mobilized individuals will develop strong affective bonds to a political party as typically happened in the past.<sup>1</sup> In short, cognitive mobilization may yield a significant number of a new type of non-partisans: non-aligned but also politically sophisticated. As we will explain below, these new non-partisans should be a primary source of the fluidity and volatility observed in recent German elections.

<sup>1</sup> Our argument is partially based on a functionalist model of partisanship developed by Shively (1979; also see Dalton, 1984, 2007; Inglehart, 1990: ch. 11). In addition, changing images of parties as political institutions and the norms of citizenship may dissuade the development of party ties among some cognitively mobilized citizens (Inglehart, 1990).

The research literature is divided on the causal relationship between partisan mobilization and cognitive mobilization. Some cross-national evidence suggests that cognitive mobilization creates a new group of sophisticated independents, and the proportion of the public that qualifies as these new independents is generally increasing in Western democracies (Dalton, 2000; Inglehart, 1990: 366).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Ohr et al. (2009) claim that the growth of independents in the German electorate is concentrated among the less-sophisticated sectors of the public (also see Arzheimer, 2006). Albright (2009) is also critical of the thesis that cognitive mobilization is a driving force behind weakened partisan identifications; however, he finds a disproportionate increase in non-partisans among the more cognitively mobilized Germans (pp. 257–58).

This article marshals some new evidence on the causal relationship between cognitive mobilization and partisan dealignment. More centrally, however, we focus on mobilization patterns as the independent variable, analyzing the joint effects of partisan and cognitive mobilization on contemporary political behavior. First, we track the changing distribution of mobilization patterns over time. In other words, we describe how the cognitive abilities of independents (and partisans) have significantly changed over the past several decades. Second, we examine the impact of these different sources of political mobilization on electoral attitudes and behaviors. The results provide a more accurate assessment about the diverse nature of the current German electorate and the implications of these patterns for electoral politics.

## 2. Measuring party mobilization and cognitive mobilization

Although conceptually distinct, party mobilization and cognitive mobilization are normally correlated in the real world. Indeed, the logic of party mobilization is that strong party ties stimulate political awareness and involvement, and some causal flow works in the opposite direction.

However, we treat each mobilization dimension as a distinct characteristic of the electorate. Table 1 presents a typology based on the cross-classification of having a partisan identity or not, and the level of cognitive mobilization (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Peterson, 1978; Inglehart, 1990, ch. 10; Dalton, 1984, 2007). This typology yields four ideal groups that represent distinct mobilization patterns and define the basis of our analyses.

“Apoliticals” conform to the independents originally described by Campbell et al. (1960: 143–45). That is, apoliticals are located at the boundary of politics they should be less involved in politics, politically less sophisticated, and less concerned about political issues and the candidates of the day.

“Ritual partisans” represent the functional model of partisanship as a guiding political identity in the absence of

<sup>2</sup> Inglehart (1990) finds sharp generational differences in the patterns of partisan and cognitive mobilization for Europeans, which suggest the distribution of mobilization types will continue to shift as a consequence of generational change. Holmberg's (1994) longitudinal analyses of Swedish partisanship yield similar findings.



**Table 1**  
The mobilization typology.

Cognitive mobilization	Party mobilization	
	Independents	Weak/strong PID
High	Apartisans	Cognitive Partisans
Low	Apoliticals	Ritual Partisans

cognitive sophistication. Ritual partisans should support their preferred party and participate in party-related activities such as voting or campaigns. However, their party support should be almost a habitual activity, and political involvement or understanding is less likely to extend to areas where party cues are lacking.

“Cognitive partisans” score highly on both mobilization dimensions. Their party attachments should stimulate involvement in party-related activities. At the same time, this group also possesses the cognitive resources to understand politics beyond basic partisan loyalties. The behavior of cognitive partisans may parallel that of ritual partisans in many areas—such as higher voting turnout and stable voting preferences—but these behavior are based on informed judgments rather than habitual party loyalties.

“Apartisans” are the focus of this study. They are political independents – but they are independents of a much different sort than the apoliticals. Apartisans generally possess the skills and resources necessary to orient themselves to politics without depending on party labels. They may participate in elections and other party-related activities, although they are less supportive of party-based politics, and their political involvement may extend beyond the partisan sphere. The nature of vote choice should also differ for apartisans when compared to apoliticals, since apartisans will be more informed on the issues and more aware of party positions (Dalton, 2007).

The important feature of this typology is that it distinguishes between different types of citizens who are normally combined when either dimension is considered separately. For example, the *American Voter* and early German electoral research described independents in terms that best fit the apolitical category (Baker et al., 1981, ch. 8). The cognitive mobilization thesis suggests that sophisticated apartisans now comprise an increased share of the independents. Similarly, ritual partisans and cognitive partisans often are combined, although we propose that each group approaches politics in a substantially different manner. Therefore, distinguishing between these four distinct groups should clarify our understanding of contemporary electoral behavior.

To study the groups in this typology, we separately measured party mobilization and cognitive mobilization across German election studies from 1976 until 2009.<sup>3</sup> We measured the partisanship dimension with the standard question developed by the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* that

asks about long-term partisan ties.<sup>4</sup> We distinguish between those who express a partisan preference on the initial partisanship question, and those who do not. The cognitive dimension is somewhat more complicated to operationalize with existing survey data. Cognitive mobilization implies that citizens possess the skills and resources necessary to become politically engaged with less dependence on external cues. In addition, our cognitive mobilization measure should include the motivation to apply these skills to politics so that latent abilities are applied to political decision making. Conceptually it is important to examine the effects of these two traits—skills and motivations—jointly because both are required to develop cognitive mobilization for political behavior. Following a series of prior studies (Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1990: ch. 10), we constructed a cognitive mobilization index by combining education (to represent the skills component) with interest in public affairs (to represent the motivational component).<sup>5</sup> The cognitively mobilized possess both the skills and the motivation to grapple with the complexities of politics.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The question reads: “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?”.

<sup>5</sup> Ideally, we prefer a measure that more directly taps political cognition but none is available over time. Thus, we rely on an indirect measure of cognitive mobilization, but one that has been widely used in previous research. The cognitive mobilization index is an additive combination of education and general interest in politics. The respondent's educational level was coded: 0) *Hauptschule* or *Volkschule*, 1) *Mittlere Reife* to *Abitur*, and 2) *Abitur* or more. General political interest was coded: 0) little interest (*kaum, gar nicht*), 1) some interest (*etwas*), and 2) strong interest. The *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* slightly changed the way they asked the interest question across surveys; and we combined the two separate questions in the early surveys (1976–1987) to be comparable to the single question asked since 1992. Political interest was not asked in the 1990 election surveys. The 2009 GLES asked a different political interest question which produced a lower level of expressed interest. The distribution of education has increased dramatically over time for the electorate as a whole. Political interest has also increased from 31.8 percent scoring high in 1976 to 51.5 percent in 2005. These two questions were added together to yield a five point index (0–4). The cutting point on the cognitive mobilization index is an analytic decision. We set a value of 3 or 4 as high cognitive mobilization. This requires at least the highest score on one indicator and the second highest score on the other. About half the samples score high on cognitive mobilization by the end of the series, compared to about a fifth in 1976. Because of the different political interest question in 2009, we divided the scale at 0–1 and 2–4 to produce a distribution comparable to 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Education and political interest are modestly correlated (the Pearson  $r$  is 0.29 in 1976 and 0.27 in 2005). We combine the two items because both make an independent theoretical and empirical contribution to measuring cognitive mobilization. A partial validation of the separate importance of both variables comes from examining their relationship with political knowledge (the 2009 GLES included two knowledge questions on the importance of the second vote and the 5 percent hurdle). We created a simple additive political knowledge index combining correct knowledge of the function of the second vote and the 5 percent hurdle for Bundestag representation (0 = no items correct, 2 = both items correct). Both education and political interest have a significant independent impact in a multivariate model predicting knowledge, and their total impact is greater than either taken alone:

Variable	Beta weight
Education	0.116
Interest	0.276
Multiple R	0.322

<sup>3</sup> The data in this research were provided by GESIS in Germany and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research in the United States; only the author is responsible for the analyses presented here. We used the 1976 German election study (S0823), the *Politbarometer*s for several months proximate to each election, and the 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (1103).

**Table 2**  
The distribution of mobilization types over time, 1976–2009.

Mobilization type	1976	1980	1983	1987	1994	1998	2002	2005	2009W	2009E	1976–2005 change
Ritual partisan	64.5	67.3	58.0	55.6	42.2	34.7	31.3	28.7	29.4	21.2	–35.8
Cognitive partisan	16.5	14.0	15.5	17.0	24.2	27.6	35.8	38.9	40.4	36.2	+22.4
Apartisan	3.9	2.9	4.3	5.1	10.8	12.5	13.5	14.7	13.0	16.1	+10.8
Apolitical	15.1	15.8	22.2	22.4	22.8	25.2	19.6	17.7	17.9	25.7	+2.6
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
(N)	1995	2856	1621	1870	2065	1290	4040	3109	2869	857	

Source: 1976 German Election Study, Politbarometers 1980–2005, German Longitudinal Election Studies, 2009.

Note: For the construction of the mobilization typology see endnote <sup>6</sup>. The results for 2009 use a slightly different method, and East–West comparisons are based on region of birth rather than current residence.

It is not clear how the expansion of education and political interest over the past several decades have affected the distribution of these four groups. Because party mobilization and cognitive mobilization are generally positively correlated ( $r = 0.06$  in 1976), the growth of cognitive mobilization over time should have strengthened partisan ties if the initial relationship was constant. In fact, the relationship between the two dimensions has increased over time, which [Ohr et al. \(2009\)](#) interpret as evidence that cognitive mobilization strengthens partisanship even more so today (also see [Albright, 2009](#)). But partisanship has obviously weakened, and thus correlational analyses miss the dramatic changes in the distribution of cognitive mobilization over time, and how this interacts with partisan mobilization. The central question is whether the new independents are located primarily among the apoliticals as the traditional partisanship model would predict, or among apartisans.

[Table 2](#) summarizes the distribution of mobilization types over time: we focus on residents of the pre-1990 Federal Republic to make the results comparable over time. When our series begins in 1976, partisanship is at its highpoint and previous socio-economic growth was already transforming the cognitive resources of the German public. The distribution of groups broadly reflects the patterns that the traditional party identification model would predict. Ritual partisans – those with party identifications and low cognitive mobilization – constituted two-thirds of the public in 1976. These citizens necessarily depend on party heuristics to manage the complex world of politics. By comparison, cognitive partisans comprise about a sixth of the public in 1976. This is a higher level of partisanship, and lower levels of cognitive partisanship than found in the United States prior to the onset of dealignment ([Dalton, 2007](#)), but this may partially reflect differences in survey questions between election studies.

Among independents, most are initially the traditional apoliticals who lack both party cues and cognitive skills to deal with politics. The proportion of sophisticated apartisans is barely a trace element in the 1976 electorate – the smallest of these four groups. In these terms, the traditional description of independents was generally accurate at the beginning of this time series (even more so if we could extrapolate back to earlier elections).

Over the next three decades, however, the erosion of party ties and the growth of cognitive mobilization transform the German public. By the 2005 election (the last

currently available with the standard Forschungsgruppe Wahlen questions), the distribution of partisan types has changed substantially. Higher levels of cognitive mobilization mean that the percentage of ritual partisans decreases by more than half (to 28.7%). Thus there are far fewer citizens whose electoral behavior now depends on habitual party cues, which was the logic of the functional model of partisanship. Another effect of higher cognitive mobilization is to increase the number of cognitive partisans, which becomes the largest group (38.9%).

Equally important, the decline in identifiers and the rise in cognitive mobilization substantially alter the nature of non-partisans. Independents were once predominately composed of the less-sophisticated apoliticals, but now independents are a nearly equal mix of apoliticals and apartisans. Apartisans grew nearly threefold over this time span. Moreover, this time trend is not simply the consequence of expanding educational levels in the electorate (although we consider expanding education an important basis of cognitive mobilization). If the initial positive relationship between party mobilization and cognitive mobilization from 1976 was projected forward, rising cognitive mobilization would have stimulated a slight increase in partisanship. Instead, these new cognitively mobilized citizens have turned into apartisans *at a higher level than in the past*.

[Ohr et al. \(2009\)](#) present sophisticated statistical analyses to argue that cognitive mobilization has not eroded German partisanship, but their extensive controls distort the basic patterns. If one simply examines those who score high on the cognitive mobilization index, the ratio of cognitive partisans to apartisans steadily shifts toward the latter. Apartisans were only 19.1 percent of the cognitively mobilized in 1976, and are 27.4 percent in 2005. Moreover, since the proportion of the public that score high in cognitive mobilization has more than doubled over time, this magnifies the overall impact of this changing ratio.

The next two columns extend these results to the 2009 election and compare results from western and eastern Germans.<sup>7</sup> Because the German Longitudinal Election

<sup>7</sup> There has been considerable East/West mobility since 1990, so a definition of West and East in terms of current residence is less accurate in 2009. Therefore, we used the GLES question on where respondents were born to define the Western and Eastern publics in this table and subsequent analyses.

Study used a different question for political interest, the initial distribution of cognitive mobilization is not comparable to the earlier surveys from the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. We therefore used a different cutting point for cognitive mobilization to produce distributions comparable to 2005. As we should expect, levels of partisanship are lower among Easterners, so both partisan groups are smaller. Apoliticals are significantly more common in the East, which largely reflects lower levels of political interest. The percentage of apartisans is roughly the same across these two regional groups.

Thus, the contemporary German electorate is significantly different from the electorate of the 1970s – they are less partisan and more likely to possess the cognitive skills and resources to independently manage the complexities of politics. Growing sophistication has expanded the pool of apartisans as well as cognitive partisans. Equally important, the proportion of voters who approach each election based on ritual dependence on party cues has decreased dramatically.

These results largely parallel findings from the United States and other established democracies (Dalton, 2007; Inglehart, 1990: ch. 10). The one exception is that there has been roughly the same absolute percentage increase in cognitive partisans and apartisans in the United States. In Germany, the absolute percentage increase is greater among cognitive partisans, but the relative increase in apartisans is greater because they had a much smaller initial size. This suggests that the German parties have been more effective in retaining partisans even in the face of cognitive mobilization, perhaps because of the centrality of partisanship in a parliamentary system and the introduction of new parties to attract dissatisfied voters.

Finally, the cognitive mobilization theory implies that there is a strong generational component to the longitudinal trends in Table 2. That is, as the political characteristics of succeeding generations shift in response to social modernization, the mix of mobilization patterns shifts among the overall public. However, this generational pattern is not entirely obvious. We know that younger age groups have a higher education level which is one component of the mobilization index. Yet political interest is also typically lower among the young. So these two elements of cognitive mobilization might counteract one another.

To examine generational patterns explicitly, Fig. 1 presents cohort differences in political mobilization for Westerners.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most apparent trend in the figure is the smaller percentage of ritual partisans among younger age groups; from a majority among the oldest cohort to barely a sixth among the youngest. This reinforces the evidence that the era of voters deciding on the basis of

habitual party ties with limited cognitive awareness is slowly fading. Instead, the percentage of cognitive partisans and apartisans grows among younger cohorts *by about the same percentages*. Another significant feature of the figure is the relatively constant percentage of apoliticals across age groups—as we saw across time in Table 2. This suggests that a significant proportion of the public will remain unengaged in politics for reasons that are relatively independent of the forces of social modernization.

Social learning predicts that some additional members of the youngest cohorts may develop party ties as they age, but the patterns of dealignment suggest that partisan learning is following a different track from the past. Comparisons of the age patterns in 1976 and 2005 confirm a generational shift in the patterns of partisanship.<sup>9</sup> Among those who were under 30 in 1976, 81 percent were partisans, mostly ritual partisans. Instead of party ties strengthening with age, they actually weaken slightly by 2005 for this cohort (73 percent partisans). While the percentage of apoliticals is relatively constant, the percentage of apartisans doubles from 6 percent to 13 percent. Another indication of generation change is the comparison of youth in 1976 and 2005. The percentage of apartisans is much higher at the later time point (6 percent versus 19 percent), and the percentage of identifiers among youth in 2005 drops to 58 percent. Similar longitudinal analyses for the United States show that the youth of the mid-1960s became more apartisan as they aged (Dalton forthcoming, ch. 3). Similar generation patterns have been found by Inglehart (1990) for six EU member states and Sören Holmberg (1994) for Swedish generations. Such longitudinal findings are consistent with a generational explanation of the patterns in the Fig. 1 cross-section analyses.

### 3. The implications of changing mobilization patterns

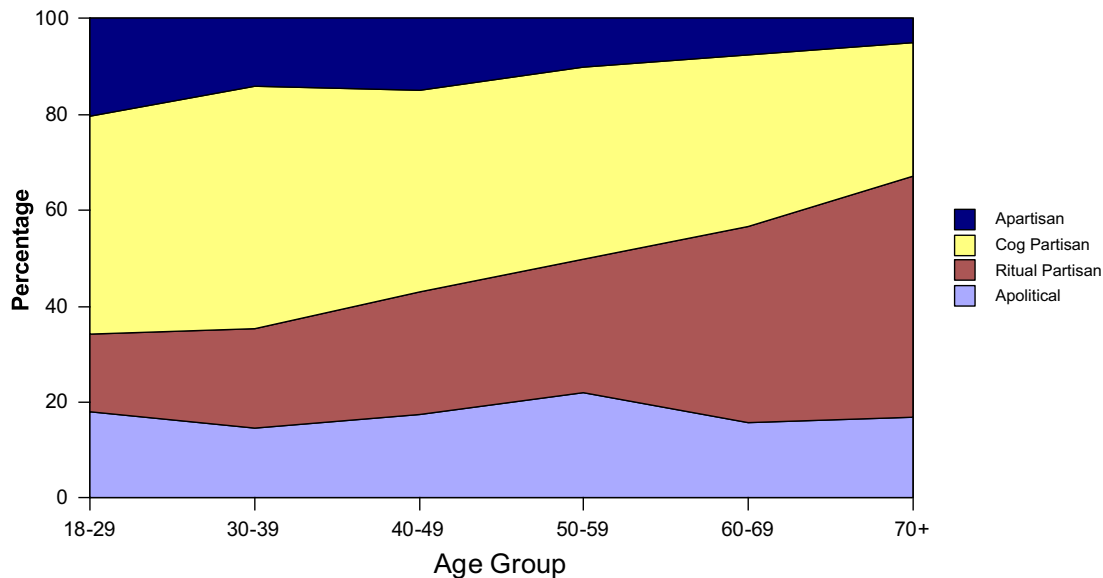
The ultimate value of the mobilization typology derives from its ability to discriminate between different patterns of electoral behavior. Our discussion of the party and cognitive mobilization theories has alluded to several potential consequences. For example, apoliticals and apartisans should be less predictable voters because they lack party loyalties, but apartisans should be more engaged in the political process (Dalton, 2007). The basis of political choice should also vary in predictable ways across mobilization types.

To test the impact of this typology, we focus on three areas that Campbell et al. (1960: ch. 6) initially linked to the

<sup>8</sup> We do not present results for Easterners because their electoral experience covers a shorter time period and the democratization process in the East may produce different generational patterns. There are about 10 percent more apoliticals for each cohort in the East, and roughly similar percentages of apartisans across age groups. The largest differences are for ritual partisans who are more numerous among older Westerners; and among cognitive partisans who are more numerous among young Westerners.

<sup>9</sup> The table below compares the under 30 age group in 1976 to approximately the same cohort in the 2005 Politbarometer surveys. In addition, we display the political orientations of the under 30 age group in 2005:

	Under 30 in 1976	45–59 in 2005	Under 30 in 2005
Ritual partisan	55.1	33.6	18.6
Cognitive partisan	25.9	39.5	39.8
Apartisan	6.2	12.6	19.0
Apolitical	12.7	14.3	22.6
Total	100%	100%	100%



**Fig. 1.** Age group differences in mobilization patterns. Source: 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES1103), only for those born in the older Federal Republic.

functional value of partisanship. We first examine differences in electoral commitment as a function of mobilization patterns. Then we consider differences in the content of political evaluations. Finally, we examine the consequences of mobilization patterns on electoral volatility.

### 3.1. Mobilization patterns and electoral commitment

Among its many reputed effects, partisanship motivates people to participate in campaigns as a display of party support; like sports fans, they show up to support their party. Even as the campaign begins, many strong partisans may start with their voting preferences set, and thus are unlikely to be affected by the campaign (Converse, 1966; Falter and Rattinger, 1982). Conversely, the traditional image of non-partisans argued that they were less likely to follow the campaign or to vote, and thus might be unmoved by the political winds of the campaign. This is where the development of apartisans might change the dynamics of elections. Because apartisans possess both high levels of political interest and are better educated, they should be more politically engaged. Apartisans should therefore participate more than apolitical non-partisans, and perhaps even approaching the turnout level of partisans. In addition, because apartisans lack standing partisan predispositions, they are more likely to be affected by the content of campaigns—judging the rival parties' positions, reflecting on the choices, and deciding later in the campaign.

We can test the impact of mobilization patterns on electoral commitment with several examples: when voting decisions are made, the certainty of voting decisions, and actual turnout in the election. Partisans, for instance, should enter the campaign with their party preferences already determined, while non-partisans decide later. The first bar in Fig. 2 describes the percentage of each mobilization group that says they decided their voting preference in the last few weeks of the 2009 campaign. Conversely, partisans routinely enter the campaign with their

preferences already decided. In 2009, only 13 percent of ritual partisans say they decided during the last weeks of the campaign, as did 14 percent of cognitive partisans. A full 49 percent of apoliticals and 43 percent of apartisans say they decided during the last weeks of the campaign. A responsible voter should consider what occurs during the last weeks of the campaign: in 2009 this included a TV Duel between Merkel and Steinmeier, and intensifying issue debates between the parties over issues of economic reform, Afghanistan, and environmental policy.

Another indicator of electoral uncertainty is the percentage who said it was difficult to make their voting decision. Again, few in either of the two partisan groups said they had difficulty making their decision, since these are the party *Stammwähler* who decide before the campaign has even begun. In contrast, a third or more of the two non-partisan groups state it was difficult to decide on which party to support.

Apoliticals and apartisans are thus uncommitted German voters, who have the potential to produce electoral volatility because of their lack of partisan commitments. However, the big difference between these two non-partisan groups is their actual participation. The last two bars in the figure show the large majority of apartisans actually voted in the 2009 Bundestagswahl (79%), while just less than half of apoliticals voted (49%). Apartisans are similar to the turnout about ritual partisans even though they lack the mobilizing effect of a party loyalty. Similarly, a high percentage of apartisans report voting in both the 2005 and 2009 elections, while only half of apoliticals say they voted in both elections. If one combines both these factors—uncertain party support and high turnout—this means that apartisans introduce greater volatility into German elections.

### 3.2. Mobilization patterns and political evaluations

Campbell et al. (1960) described party identification as a heuristic that helps individuals understand and evaluate



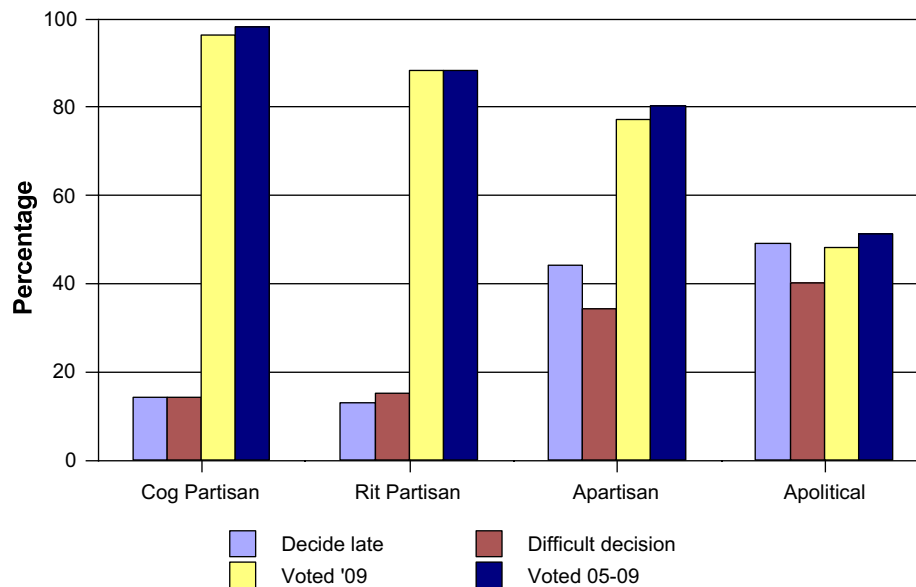


Fig. 2. Mobilization types and campaign engagement. Source: 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES1103).

political phenomena. Using partisanship as a guide, citizens have a basis for judging candidates and determining their positions on the issues of the day. The commonness of such party cues makes party identification a valuable guide for voters who lack the ability to make such judgments on their own. In contrast, the cognitive mobilization thesis suggests that sophisticated individuals should have a richer basis of political evaluations, going beyond habitual party affiliations to consider policy positions and other substantive factors. These contrasting bases of political behavior between partisans and cognitively mobilized independents were recognized by *The American Voter*, but they expected that few cognitively mobilized citizens would be non-partisans.<sup>10</sup> Supporting the importance of cognitive mobilization, previous studies in the United States demonstrated that the better educated and the politically sophisticated place more weight on issues as a basis of their electoral decision making; less-sophisticated voters rely more on partisanship and social cues (Dalton, 2007; Sniderman et al., 1991).

In terms of our mobilization typology, ritual partisans should emphasize party cues, and relatively less often cite policy criteria or ideological factors in judging the candidates. Apartisans should be a mirror image; they should place less weight on party cues as a basis of candidate evaluation and instead give more weight to policy criteria. Cognitive partisans benefit from the cues provided by their party ties and their cognitive level. Like ritual partisans, they may judge candidates in terms of their party affiliations; and like apartisans, policy should also be an

important basis of evaluation. At the other extreme, apoliticals should have the shallowest basis of evaluation, since they lack either party cues or cognitive traits that could provide bases of evaluation.

The closest we can come to the content of evaluations is an open-ended question in the 2009 GLES that asks for the reasons for one's vote.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, this excludes non-voters from the comparisons, and we have just seen that mobilization patterns strongly affect voting turnout. Especially among apoliticals where political involvement is limited, we miss the opinions of non-voters who presumably have even more limited images of the election. But while this question might not be ideal, it should illustrate whether the basis of political mobilization affect the content of political evaluations.

We recoded the reasons for voting into a set of standard categories: 1) specific issues, 2) broad political goals, 3) party traits, 4) social group benefits, 5) candidate traits, and 6) don't know responses.<sup>12</sup> Table 3 crosstabulates the mobilization index with these categories. One of the sharpest differences is between ritual partisans and apartisans. Ritual partisans most often cite party traits (33%) as the reason for their vote, and then broad political goals. In contrast, apartisans are the least likely to cite party traits as a reason for their vote (25%) – even less than apoliticals – and instead focus on programmatic criteria such as political goals and specific political issues (75% versus 56% ritual partisans). Apartisans are also the most likely to cite candidate characteristics as a basis of their voting choice.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell et al. (1960: 136) stated: "Presumably, among people of relatively impoverished attitude who yet have a sense of partisan loyalty, party identification has a more direct influence on behavior than it has among people with a well-elaborated view of what their choice concerns... the voter who knows simply that he is a Republican or Democrat responds directly to his stable allegiance without the mediating influence of perceptions he has formed of the objects he must choose between".

<sup>11</sup> In the United States we used the open-ended party likes and dislikes to assess the bases of political evaluations (Dalton, 2007), but such a question was not available in the German surveys.

<sup>12</sup> The survey asked: "Und warum haben Sie diese Partei gewählt? Bitte nennen Sie mir die wichtigsten Gründe". Up to three responses were coded. We primarily used the existing precategorized codes to identify categories, with some adjustments to create a distinct social group category. The coding system is available from the author.

**Table 3**  
Mobilization index and bases of electoral decision.

Response	Apolitical	Ritual partisan	Apartisan	Cognitive partisan
Specific issues	13	27	26	28
Political goals	34	29	49	42
Party traits	28	33	25	29
Group benefits	10	19	11	18
Candidate	8	5	10	8
DK	11	6	2	4
Total	103%	120%	123%	130%

Source: German Longitudinal Election Studies, 2009; western born respondents only.

Note: Percentages are calculated on a base of all responses with up to three responses possible.

This table further shows clear contrasts between apartisans and apolitical independents even though the non-voting half of apoliticals is not included. Apartisans are more likely to cite issues, political goals, and candidate traits as a basis of their vote and give a richer array of responses than the apoliticals. This underscores the point that apartisans represent a different type of non-partisan that should not be equated with the traditional apolitical.

Cognitive partisans reflect their dual bases of political evaluation. On the one hand, cognitive partisans are more likely than the average German voter to cite party traits (and group characteristics) as a reason for the voting choice—similar to the ritual partisans. On the other hand, cognitive parties are also more likely than the average to cite specific issues and political goals as a reason for their vote, albeit at lower levels than apartisans. These dual bases of evaluation mean that cognitive partisans give the largest number of responses for their voting choice (130% multiple response rate).

### 3.3. Mobilization patterns and electoral change

Electoral volatility has been generally increasing across recent Bundestagswahlen.<sup>13</sup> The 2009 election seemed to push inter-election volatility to a new level with the huge dropoff for the Social Democrats and the increased electoral support for the three minor parties. The increasing volatility of the vote is one of the clearest indications of the weakening of citizen attachments to parties. Our analyses to this point suggest that apartisans are disproportionately contributing to this dealignment trend by their focus on issue voting and their response to the events of the campaign. Thus, our final set of analysis compares the patterns of mobilization to various measures of electoral change.

Fig. 3 presents three separate measures of electoral change. Most basic, the first bar in the figure displays the percentages who claim to have shifted their party vote from the 2005 Bundestagswahl to 2009. Overall, nearly

a quarter of the respondents who voted in both elections say they supported a different party, which is a relatively high degree of volatility. Barely a sixth of the two partisan groups switched their vote, but a full majority of apartisans (57%) switched their votes between elections.

One of the significant outcomes of 2009 was the shift in support from the two large parties to the three minor parties, and the impact of mobilization patterns is clearly evident in this case. Only 7 percent of ritual partisans and 12 percent of cognitive partisans shifted their second vote from SPD or CDU/CSU in 2005 to one of the minor parties in 2009. However, 30 percent of the apartisans shifted from the major parties to one of the three minor parties. In other words, apartisans are disproportionately contributing to the dynamic element of elections.<sup>14</sup>

To ensure that the results are not limited to just the unique aspects of the 2005–09 Bundestag comparison, and to broaden our evidence of electoral change, we sought other measures of voting fluidity. Another comparison considers the stability of the vote from the 2009 European Parliament elections to the 2009 Bundestagswahl. Often the EP elections are considered second-order contests that allow voters to express criticism of the incumbent government. The figure shows that Apartisans are most likely to switch their votes between these two electoral contests.

Another indicators of electoral fluidity is split-ticket voting, which has also grown over time. The last bar in the figure displays the percentage of each mobilization group that supported a different party on their *Erststimme* and *Zweitstimme* in 2009. The reported levels of split-ticket voting are exceptionally high in 2009 (30%), largely because of the increased support for minor parties. The most loyal voters are the ritual partisans with only 19 percent splitting their two votes. Cognitive partisans are more likely to split their vote (32 percent) presumably as a strategic vote to support a potential coalition partner. But the greatest split-ticket voting comes from apartisans, with nearly half supporting different parties with their two votes.

In summary, the evidence of weakening party voting over time – later decisions during the campaign, more volatility between elections, and more split-ticket voting – can at least partially be traced to the changing distribution of mobilization patterns within the German electorate. The decrease in ritual partisans and the concomitant increase in apartisans shift the basis of electoral choice toward short term factors, such as issue preferences and candidate image, and leads more voters to base their choices on the content of the campaign. The result is the evidence of spreading partisan dealignment during the last several decades.

<sup>13</sup> Longitudinal analyses from 1972 until 2009 show a strong correlation between year of election and the Pederson index of volatility (Pearson  $r = 0.67$ ) and the effective number of electoral Parties ( $r = 0.32$ ). Part of this trend is due to the effects of unification, but even a pre/post-1990 control finds a significant increase. See Dalton (in press, chap. 8).

<sup>14</sup> In addition, levels of cognitive mobilization shape the specific pattern of vote switching. Most of the cognitive partisans who changed their votes to a minor party selected either the FDP if they had voted CDU/CSU in 2005 or the Greens if they had voted SPD. This seems a reasonable attempt to strength a potential partisan ally. But vote switching among ritual partisan seem more random. The same pattern occurs for apartisans and cognitive partisans. This suggests that vote switching among the cognitively mobilized is more programmatic.

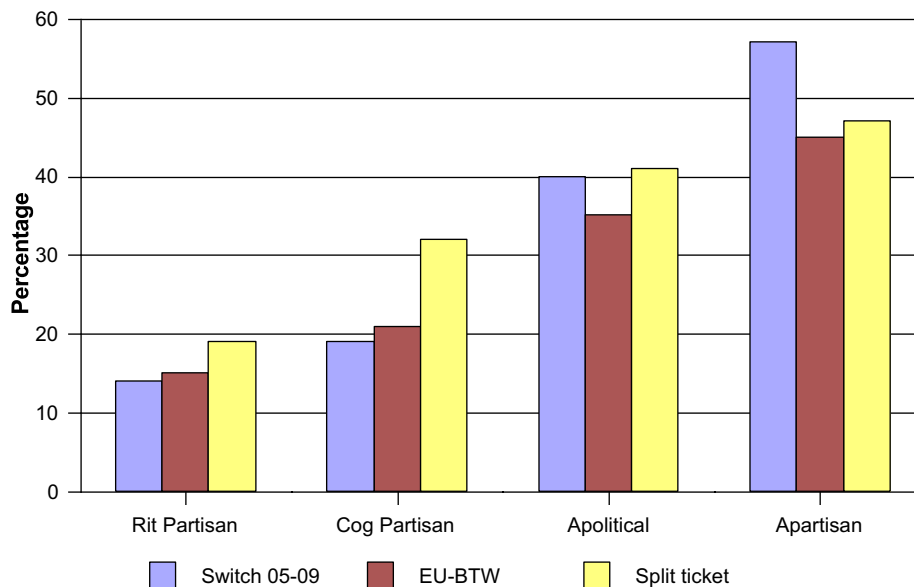


Fig. 3. Mobilization types and electoral change. Source: 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES1103).

#### 4. Cognitive mobilization and electoral change

There has always been an ironic, undemocratic aspect of modern electoral research. Democratic theory presumed that voters evaluated government to hold it accountable, and made reasoned choices at election time. Yet the classic studies of electoral behavior argued that most voters approached elections with standing partisan predispositions based on inherited and habitual partisan attachments. The landmark *American Voter*, for instance, stated “The ideal of the Independent citizen, attentive to politics, concerned with the course of government, who weights the rival appears of a campaign and reaches a judgment that is unswayed by partisan prejudice, has... a vigorous history in the tradition of political reform.” (Campbell et al., 1960: 143). They then concluded that this normative ideal poorly fit empirical reality.

This article has argued that the German electorate, and the public in other advanced industrial democracies, has undergone a fundamental change in the bases of political mobilization since these early assessments by electoral researchers. Even after the consolidation of the German party system in the 1970s, non-partisans largely existed at the margins of politics with limited involvement and sophistication. At the same time, the majority of the public relied on habitual party loyalties as a guide for their electoral behavior. Party identification was more than a party predisposition for these partisans; it was a cue that enabled them to manage a complex political world that might otherwise be beyond their conceptual abilities or interests.

Social change over the past several decades has transformed the public. Expanding educational levels, increased access to political information through the media, changing citizenship norms, growing interest in politics, and other social trends have produced a process of cognitive mobilization that expands the political skills and resources of the average citizen. Today, fewer individuals now rely primarily on habitual party loyalties as a cue for electoral behavior.

The majority of independents and partisans now possess significantly greater cognitive skills and resources. Cognitive mobilization has been especially important in expanding the group of new independents, apartisans, who are cognitively mobilized but who lack partisan ties. These apartisans are nearly the polar opposite of the traditional image of non-partisans presented in early electoral studies literature. They are better educated, knowledgeable about politics, and politically engaged, even if they remain somewhat distant from political parties. These apartisans are much closer to the informed independents found in democratic theory but heretofore lacking in empirical electoral studies.

In summary, as we suggested two decades ago (Dalton and Rohrschneider, 1990): the process of cognitive mobilization is shifting electoral behavior from long-term, habitual party cues that were used as a heuristic by an unsophisticated German public, toward a more evaluative and sophisticated electorate that makes their electoral choices on the issues and candidates of the campaign only partially based on partisan affiliations. Concomitantly, this contributes to the growing volatility and fluidity of electoral politics in Germany. The rise in inter-election volatility, split-ticket voting, and decision making later during the campaign can at least partially be traced to the shifting sources of political mobilization within the electorate. Such trends contribute to the on-going dealignment of German party politics.

While our analyses have focused on the German public, we see these processes as generally affecting advanced industrial democracies. To the extent that comparisons with U.S. trends are possible given the differences in measurement (Dalton, 2007, in press), cognitive mobilization has similar effects on both electorates. Both publics are experiencing an increase in the percentage of apartisans, which leads to a consequent growth of a more fluid electoral process, greater weight on issues and policy in making voting choices, and increased electoral volatility. The one

apparent difference between America and the Federal Republic is the ability of German parties to retain a larger share of the cognitively mobilized electorate, which may reflect methodological differences between the two election study series or the greater centrality of parties in the German electoral process.

Because cognitive mobilization is creating an electorate that is divided in their basis of mobilization, our findings strongly argue for a disaggregated view of contemporary electorates. Partisans and independents no longer fit the initial stereotypes of these groups in the electoral research literature. Apoliticals and apartisans have different political images of the world and decision making processes – even though both are political independents – just as there are basic differences in how ritual partisans and cognitive partisans relate to the political world. These four types of citizens bring much different decision making criteria into their electoral choices, and this should carry over to other aspects of political behavior. Thus, when other contributors to this symposium discuss the impact of issues or candidate images for the entire German electorate, this is averaging together very different yet interpretable patterns for subsectors of the electorate. There is not one average German voter, but distinct groups who approach the election in markedly varied terms. Such heterogeneity within the electorate, and the need for campaigns that recognize these differences, should be an element of German elections for a considerable period.

Finally, we do not want to overstate the findings, because understanding the world of politics is still a difficult task for many voters. Nevertheless, the shift in cognitive mobilization has the potential to move the electoral process toward the ideal of democratic theory—voters making independent judgments on the candidates and issues of the day, rather than voting on the basis of habitual party loyalties inherited from one's parents. Our data thus suggest that the growth in apartisans (and cognitive partisans) has moved the electorate closer to that normative ideal.

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