

## **PIVOTAL PARTIES IN GERMANY SINCE 1961**

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## INTRODUCTION

Germany has a multiparty system in which coalition governments are the norm. That said, a key distinction can be made between the two main or major parties (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) and the various smaller parties (currently Free Democrats, Greens, and ex-communists/leftists). In this paper we focus on the smaller parties and the role that such potentially ‘pivotal’ parties have played in German government formation, federally but even more so across the sixteen *Länder* (states). Traditionally the main pivotal party in the German party system was the classical liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). Since the early 1980s, however, the Green party has increasingly established itself as an alternative to the FDP in this regard.

From the 1961 West German election onwards no federal party has won an outright majority and every government has been a coalition. In the 1960s and 1970s, when there were only three parties in the Bundestag, the Free Democrats provided the hinge or the ‘pivot’ around which the two-dimensional German party system revolved, and it affected decisively the nature of the federal government and chancellor. Furthermore, up through the 1980s the Free Democrats were able to sell themselves as a ‘liberal corrective’ to the main German parties, in that they prevented SPD-led governments from becoming too leftist and CDU-led governments from becoming too conservative. The party thus had the function of being an ‘ideological balancer’, and the voters seemed to appreciate this balancing role of the FDP.

The FDP’s crucial position in the (West) German party system was, among other things, due to the lack of alternative coalition partners for the Christian Democrats (on the right) and for the Social Democrats (on the left). This changed once the Greens established themselves as a viable coalition partner (so far at the national level only for the SPD, though). The FDP’s bargaining position was weakened as a result.

In this paper we shall thus assess the hinge or pivot role of the FDP in various time periods and then the hinge or pivot role of the Greens in the period since 1981 and the PDS/*Die Linke* since 1990. This will be done both federally and at the state-level, with the focus on variations across the *Länder* (states). An original five-point scale of “opportunity structure” (mathematical influence) is used here. Overall, we shall demonstrate that based on that policy-blind measure the Greens have replaced or at least equalled the FDP as the key hinge party in German politics and that the PDS/*Die Linke* is the key pivotal player in Eastern Germany.

## GOVERNMENT FORMATION PATTERNS IN GERMANY

The 2009 *Bundestag* election was typical of those of postwar Germany in two key ways. No single party won a majority. Consequently a coalition government was formed out of this hung parliament, but more specifically a coalition of one of the larger parties (in this case the Christian Democrats) and one of the smaller parties (in this case the Free Democrats). These patterns occur for a variety of reasons. Germany has a multi-party system, currently with five parties (six parties, if one were to count separately the CDU’s Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union) represented in the lower house of the German legislature (*Bundestag*). It uses a mixed-member proportional system, with the key barrier being a five percent national threshold (or winning at least three directly-elected local SMP seats). Its positive parliamentary system (involving a vote of investiture) works against minority governments. A coalition of one bigger

and one smaller party, assuming it yields a majority, will be minimal-winning. This is the case for the current federal coalition between the larger Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the smaller FDP. In contrast, elections and governments at the *Land* (state) level are more varied.

In examining elections and government formation in Germany we can distinguish roughly three time periods: a 'formative' period lasting until about 1960, a period of stable two-and-a-half party competition with a limited number of coalition patterns in which the Free Democratic Party played a crucial role, lasting from 1961 to about 1981, and a period beginning in about 1982 which has been characterized by party de-concentration especially on the left and more complex coalition formation patterns.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-1960s the FDP drifted to the centre-left of the political spectrum emphasizing a civil liberties agenda and becoming more accepting of social welfare programs and a more active state role in the economy, which would help the party to establish a federal governing coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) in 1969. This began to change in the early 1980s when the free market liberal wing of the party gained the upper hand and serious strains between the two coalition partners began to emerge. This eventually resulted in the FDP switching sides in 1982 and forming a coalition with the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). In the late 1990s and especially after losing power to the SPD-Green coalition in 1998, the party moved even further to the right on economic issues, advocating lower taxes, a much reduced role of the state in the economy and cuts in social programs. Thus, there is a much greater sense of bipolarity in the German party system, with the FDP now being more on the right than the centre. The Greens encouraged and profited from the FDP's transformation into a more neo-liberal party by winning over many of the left-liberal voters who no longer felt at home with the Free Democrats.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, reunification saw the emergence of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) as a significant political force in the new Eastern states (*Länder*). The PDS usually became the third or second largest party in these *Länder*. Despite its tainted history as the successor to the former governing party of East Germany the PDS' often pivotal position in the East would ultimately make it attractive to the SPD as a possible coalition partner. Thus, after first propping up a SPD-Green minority coalition (1994-1998) and then a SPD minority government (1998-2002) in Saxony-Anhalt it entered its first coalition government with the Social Democrats in 1998 in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Later this cooperative arrangement would also be replicated in Berlin (since 2002) and Brandenburg (since 2009). Since the PDS' merger with the predominantly West German WASG (Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice) the resulting Left party (*Die Linke*) has become a viable political player in several Western *Länder* as well.<sup>3</sup>

While the three periods generally apply to both the national and sub-national levels there are several important exceptions. For example, in terms of national government formation patterns one could make the case that the second period did not end fully until 1998 when, with the inclusion of the Greens in the governing coalition, for the first time since 1960 a party other than the traditional three was represented in the federal government.

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE GERMAN PARTY SYSTEM AND THE ROLE OF THE FDP

When examining party systems across Western Europe one is or at least was invariably struck by the long-term stability of (West) Germany's party system. Gordon Smith even called it one of the

most stable party systems in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> While in the first ten years of the Federal Republic of Germany's existence the party system was still very much in flux, this changed in the late 1950s and early 1960s when most of the smaller, mainly regional, parties failed to win seats not only in the *Bundestag* but also increasingly in the various state legislatures (*Landtage*). In 1960 the German Party (DP) was largely absorbed into the Christian Democrats. That left the FDP as the only smaller party in German politics, a situation that would last for two decades until the rise of the Greens. If a single election for the start of the "stable period" would have to be determined, 1961 would be the most likely choice of political scientists.<sup>5</sup> Thus from 1960 until the 1983 election only three parties were represented in the Bundestag. In this so-called 'two-and-a-half' party system the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU) occupied the centre-right of the political spectrum and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) represented the centre-left. Together these two catch-all *Volksparteien* (people's parties) captured between 80 and 90 percent of the votes in federal elections. The third party, the smaller, liberal, Free Democratic Party (FDP) would usually score between 5 and 12 percent of the votes.

The stability of the party system was reflected in the government-formation process in (West) Germany. From the 1961 election onwards no federal party has won an outright majority, every government has been a coalition, and, except for the national grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD which lasted from 1966 until 1969, every coalition has been minimal-winning. Even the 2005-2009 grand coalition was minimal-winning, given a more diffuse party system. Thus, in understanding coalition dynamics from 1961 onwards the role of the Free Democratic Party is crucial. The Free Democrats provided the hinge or the 'pivot around which the [German] party system revolves'.<sup>6</sup>

Within the classic 'triangular', two-dimensional (class and religiosity) German party system the FDP is middle class and secular, appealing to a small core of voters with those traits. Consequently,

[e]ach of the first six chancellors, from Adenauer to Kohl, has had his term in office decisively affected by the crucial support offered, withdrawn, or (in the case of Kiesinger, in 1969) refused by the Free Democrats.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, through the 1980s the Free Democrats were able to sell themselves as a 'liberal corrective' to the main German parties, in that they prevented SPD-led governments from becoming too leftist and CDU-led governments from becoming too conservative.<sup>8</sup> The party thus had the function of being an 'ideological balancer': since Chancellors themselves have tended to be moderates, the FDP allowed them to achieve ideological 'balance'. Helmut Schmidt thus used the FDP to 'defeat' the SPD left. After 1982, Helmut Kohl used the FDP to contain the more conservative CSU on matters of civil liberties and foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> The voters seemed to appreciate the balancing role of the FDP, inasmuch as the German electorate 'appears to have an aversion to single party government' — at least at the national level.<sup>10</sup> Pulzer once described this attitude as a '*horror majoritatis*'!<sup>11</sup> As a consequence of such an attitude, it was noted that '[t]he FDP thus benefits twice since in the absence of a majority the [relatively] victorious party will normally turn to the FDP in order to form a coalition majority'.<sup>12</sup>

However, it seems that this advantageous situation for the FDP has now largely been lost due to two developments. First, there was the appearance on the federal political scene of the Greens, which emerged as a national political organization in 1979 and became a political party

in 1980 as a result of the coalescence of several citizen initiative groups that had mainly been active in the environmental and peace movements.<sup>13</sup> Their anti-establishment, eco-libertarian and post-materialist agenda appealed particularly to better-educated younger, mainly urban voters. Growing electoral success exacerbated internal struggles for control of the party between purists ('Fundis') and moderates ('Realos'). The latter who advocated government participation to enact Green policies in cooperation with the SPD (which had programmatically moved towards the Greens in the late 1980s) eventually defeated the former who would have preferred a principled, uncompromising opposition stance.<sup>14</sup> Over time the Greens were able to establish themselves as a more likely home for educated left-liberal/left-libertarian voters, thus making the FDP less of a pivotal party and more of a centre-right wing party. Moreover, the Free Democrats' long-standing loyalty to the CDU/CSU (since 1982) as well as the party's 1997 *Wiesbaden* programme which emphasizes neo-liberal economic reform policies and de-emphasizes the FDP's long-standing image as a strong defender of civil liberties have led some to contend that the Free Democrats have now essentially become a '*Klienten Partei*' of the Christian Democrats.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, until recently a similar argument could certainly be made regarding the Greens' strategic position *vis-à-vis* the SPD.<sup>16</sup> However, the coalitions in Hamburg (formed in 2008 with the CDU) and in Saarland (formed in 2009 with the CDU and FDP) may have opened the door to future cooperation with parties on both the centre-left and the centre-right of the political spectrum. In that regard the Greens' pivotal position could now be expected to be equal to, if not stronger than, that of the FDP (at least in the Western *Länder*).<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, the FDP has failed to make permanent inroads into the new states of the former East Germany in part because in the new *Länder* '[t]here is no tradition and thus no understanding' of its traditional western role as a balancer and 'liberal corrective' within a coalition.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, despite their initial cooperation and eventual merger with Alliance 90 (*Bündnis 90*), the electoral vehicle of the small East German civil rights movement, the Greens, too, have had considerable problems establishing a stable voter base in the eastern part of the unified country. Some of the reasons for that failure include the fact that there is a much smaller audience for the Greens' post-materialist 'new politics' agenda in Eastern Germany than there is in Western Germany and the party's inability in representing specifically East German matters of concern.<sup>19</sup> In taking up the latter role the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to East Germany's ruling communist party, managed to establish itself as the third party in the eastern part of the country and even gained representation in the *Bundestag*. However, its coalition options have so far been very limited, i.e., they have been restricted to cooperation with the SPD at the *Land* level.<sup>20</sup>

## ASSESSING THE 'PIVOTAL' ROLES OF THE SMALLER PARTIES IN GERMANY

We shall assess the hinge or pivotal role of the above mentioned smaller parties both over time and at the national and sub-national levels. In order to gauge the pivotal role of a party both federally and in each *Land*, we propose the following five-point scale of its 'opportunity structure':

- 0 = the smaller party in question is not represented in the *Bundestag/Landtag*;
- 1 = the smaller party in question is represented in the legislature, but one of the main parties

- has an overall majority;
- 2 = the smaller party in question is represented in the legislature, neither of the main parties has an overall majority, nor does a coalition between one of the main parties and the smaller party in question yield a majority; this could lead to a grand coalition or (if the numbers warrant) a coalition between one of the main parties and a different smaller party, but it might also lead to a three-party coalition with the smaller party in question included — such as a “traffic light” coalition (SPD-FDP-Greens), the 2001-2004 CDU-FDP-PRO coalition in Hamburg or the current CDU-FDP-Greens “Jamaica” coalition in Saarland;
  - 3 = the smaller party in question is represented in the legislature, neither of the main parties has an overall majority, and a coalition between the larger (not either) of the main parties and the smaller party in question does yield a majority; however, a coalition between this larger main party and another smaller party would also yield a majority;
  - 4 = the smaller party in question is represented in the legislature, neither of the main parties has an overall majority, and a coalition between the larger of the main parties — and only this one — and the smaller party in question does yield a majority; thus the smaller party in question has no choice as to which of the two main parties it can join with to form a majority government (same as in the previous scenario); on the other hand, the smaller party in question is the only smaller party that would yield a coalition majority for the largest party so there is no choice in this regard for the larger party (unlike in the previous scenario); and
  - 5 = the smaller party in question is represented in the legislature, neither of the main parties has an overall majority, and a coalition between *either* one of the main parties and the smaller party in question yields a majority; the smaller party in question is thus in a clear determining hinge position, since — unless a grand coalition is formed (such as sometimes in the East against the PDS/*Die Linke*) — it is effectively the smaller party in question which decides on the government since numerically it can effect a majority coalition with either of the main parties. This scenario is the most understandable when only three parties are represented in the legislature, but it has occurred with four parties represented (Baden-Württemberg 1960, Rhineland-Palatinate 1996, Brandenburg 1999 and 2004, and Saxony-Anhalt 1994 and 2006) or even five parties (Brandenburg 2009, Thuringia 2009 — with *Die Linke* being a relatively large “third” party).

Treating these values somewhat generously as real numbers, what are the patterns nationally and across the *Länder*? Several tables here give the number of elections, means, and medians, ranking the *Länder* by the median value. We shall divide the data into three periods: 1949 to 1960, 1961 to 1980 (the high water mark of FDP influence), and 1981 to 2010. Tables 1, 2, and 3 thus show the calculations for each period.

Let us start first with the earliest period when the hinge role of the FDP was clearly weaker federally, inasmuch as the first election of 1949 produced a very fragmented parliament and, in contrast, the election of 1957 yielded a seat majority for the Christian Democrats. Generally the pivotal role of the FDP was also weaker at the Land level. Yet this was not true in

every Land; the pivotal role of the FDP was actually stronger in this first period compared to the second period in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and Schleswig-Holstein. In the first two cases this is because the elections produced hung parliaments in contrast to the majorities in the second period won by the CDU and the CSU respectively. Baden-Württemberg was also arguably the area of greatest ongoing FDP strength in the early postwar years, with well over ten percent of the vote in the first five Land elections (through 1968). In the case of Schleswig-Holstein, this is because the FDP was continually represented in the state legislature (*Landtag*) from the 1950 elections onwards, whereas in the second period it sometimes failed to clear the five percent hurdle needed to win seats.

Table 2 clearly illustrates the situation at the peak of FDP influence. In this second, ‘stable’, period, the federal situation was continuously ‘ideal’ for the FDP (scoring always a perfect “5”), the *Länder* themselves clustered into three or maybe four groups. In the top group — Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia, with Saarland and Lower Saxony close by — the overall pivotal role of the FDP was medium-high to high. In the next group — Baden-Württemberg and Berlin — the pivotal role of the FDP was medium to medium-low. However, these two groups contained only half the *Länder*. In the other half — Rhineland-Palatinate, Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Bremen, and Bavaria — the pivotal role of the FDP was medium-low or rare. We would stress a size difference here, in that the FDP was strong in the bigger *Länder* (Bavaria excepted), and weak in the smaller *Länder* (Berlin and Saarland excepted). Also, in no *Land* was the pivotal role of the FDP completely weak, if for no other reason that it very rarely failed to clear the five percent hurdle.

TABLE 1  
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF THE FDP, 1949 to 1960

Territory	N of elections	mean score	median
Federal Republic	3	2.00	2
Baden-Württemberg	3	4.33	4
North Rhine-Westphalia	3	3.00	3
Hesse	3	2.33	3
Saarland	3	2.33	3
Bavaria	3	2.33	2
Schleswig-Holstein	3	2.33	2
Lower Saxony	3	2.00	2
Rhineland-Palatinate	3	2.33	1
Berlin	3	2.00	1
Bremen	3	1.67	1
Hamburg	3	0.33	0

TABLE 2  
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF THE FDP, 1961 to 1980

Territory	N of elections	mean score	median
Federal Republic	6	5.00	5
North Rhine-Westphalia	5	4.00	5
Hesse	5	3.40	5
Saarland	4	3.25	4
Lower Saxony	5	2.60	3
Baden-Württemberg	5	2.60	1
Berlin	5	2.60	1
Rhineland-Palatinate	5	2.20	1
Hamburg	5	1.60	1
Schleswig-Holstein	5	1.60	1
Bremen	5	1.40	1
Bavaria	5	0.80	1

In the third period (1981-2010) the pivotal role of the *federal* FDP decreases to medium. Yet the situation of the federal party still remains basically stronger than all of the *Länder* parties. Indeed, in only five of these — Rhineland-Palatinate, Lower Saxony, Hesse, Baden-Württemberg, and Schleswig-Holstein — has the pivotal role of the FDP also been medium to medium-low since 1981. In three other *Länder* — Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, and North Rhine-Westphalia — the pivotal role of the FDP has been (borderline) moderate. Since 1981 the FDP's pivotal role has been weak or rare in Saxony, Bremen, and Saarland. Lastly, in the remaining group of *Länder* —Thuringia, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Hamburg, and Bavaria — the pivotal role of the FDP has been very weak and often non-existent. It is hard to offer any reason for the cluster variations in the period since 1981, other than to note that the weakest cluster contains one-party predominant *Länder*, smaller *Länder*, and 'new' *Länder*, with some of these *Länder* having two such traits.

Comparing the second and third periods (obviously only for the Western *Länder*), several points are worth noting. Only in Hesse and in Lower Saxony has the FDP been able to maintain continued coalition relevance, even if at a medium-low level. In Saarland and, to a somewhat lesser degree, in North Rhine-Westphalia, the decline in relevance of the FDP has been overwhelming. On the other hand, the increased relevance of the FDP in Rhineland-Palatinate is also striking.



TABLE 3  
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF THE FDP, 1981 to 2010

Territory	N of elections	mean score	median
Federal Republic	8	2.75	3
Rhineland-Palatinate	6	2.50	3
Lower Saxony	7	1.86	3
Hesse	9	2.11	2
Baden-Württemberg	7	2.00	2
Schleswig-Holstein	8	2.00	2
Saxony-Anhalt	5	1.60	2
Berlin	8	1.50	2
North Rhine-Westphalia	6	1.67	1.5
Saxony	5	1.20	1
Bremen	7	1.14	1
Saarland	6	0.83	1
Thuringia	5	1.00	0
Brandenburg	5	0.80	0
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	5	0.80	0
Hamburg	10	0.60	0
Bavaria	7	0.57	0

In Table 4 a similar calculation (using the same scaling system) is done for the Greens since 1981.<sup>21</sup> This calculation of course focuses only on ‘opportunity structure’ and not on ideological closeness (which precluded any Christian Democratic-Green governments until Hamburg in 2008). Here we see that the pivotal role of the Greens has been medium-high in Bremen, Hesse, Berlin, Hamburg, and the Federal Republic as a whole. Their pivotal role has been medium in Baden-Württemberg, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Rhineland-Palatinate. In Schleswig-Holstein, Saxony and Bavaria the pivotal role of the Greens has been rare, essentially just a current phenomenon in Bavaria. In all the remaining *Länder* the pivotal role of the Greens has been very weak or non-existent (never even winning a seat in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania).

TABLE 4  
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF THE GREENS, 1981 to 2010

Territory	N of elections	mean score	median
Federal Republic	8	2.88	3
Bremen	7	3.29	4
Hesse	9	3.33	3
Berlin	8	3.13	3
Hamburg	10	2.90	3
Baden-Württemberg	7	2.14	3
Lower Saxony	7	2.14	3
North Rhine-Westphalia	6	2.33	2.5
Rhineland-Palatinate	6	2.00	2.5
Schleswig-Holstein	7	1.38	1
Saxony	5	1.20	1
Bavaria	7	1.14	1
Saarland	6	0.67	0.5
Thuringia	5	1.00	0
Brandenburg	5	0.80	0
Saxony-Anhalt	5	0.80	0
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	5	0.00	0

Overall, though, it should be stressed that the pivotal role of the Greens since 1981 has been greater than or at least equal to that of the FDP in almost all jurisdictions, including the Federal Republic as a whole through 2005. At the federal level the key difference was the election of 2002, where the Greens scored a “4” (thus allowing the continuation of the SPD-Green coalition) but the FDP only scored a “2”. Of course, overall this reflects in part the weakening pivotal role of the FDP (so the ‘bar’ is lower) and indeed the fact that the FDP has failed to enter many more *Landtage* than have the Greens.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in Hesse (with the exception of the 2009 election) and especially the three city-states (Bremen, Berlin, and Hamburg), the Greens have clearly replaced the FDP as the pivotal or third force. This is actually a reasonably coherent cluster, since of the non-city-states, Hesse stands out by being not just urbanized and industrialized, but rich and (largely) protestant — factors that it shares with these city-states. In contrast to this grouping, the FDP has been a stronger pivot than the Greens in Schleswig-Holstein and Saxony-Anhalt. For their part, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate are interesting inasmuch as both the FDP and the Greens (since 1981) have been relevant pivotal actors there.

Lastly in this regard, Table 5 makes the same calculation for the PDS/*Die Linke* since reunification in 1990. Not surprisingly, its hinge role in the Federal Republic as a whole has been

modest — but still existent mathematically. In terms of the *Länder*, although there is a clear East-West distinction (with the only variations in the West based on whether or not *Die Linke* won seats in the most recent *Land* election), the Eastern *Länder* in fact divide into three groupings. A high pivotal role of the PDS/*Die Linke* in terms of seat distribution is found in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. A medium to medium-high pivotal role is found in Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, and Thuringia. In contrast, only a low pivotal role is found in Saxony, where the CDU won three straight majorities in the 1990s. Of course, as always this calculation reflects only opportunity structure, not ideological closeness. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the PDS/*Die Linke* is, or was, in government in Brandenburg, Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, all *Länder* in which the PDS/*Die Linke* has a high or medium-high pivotal role. Moreover, between 1994 and 2002 it propped up first a SPD-Green and then a SPD minority government in Saxony-Anhalt.

TABLE 5  
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF THE PDS/DIE LINKE, 1990 to 2010

Territory	N of elections	mean score	median
Federal Republic	6	2.33	2
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	5	4.60	5
Brandenburg	5	4.00	5
Saxony-Anhalt	5	3.80	3
Berlin	5	3.20	3
Thuringia	5	3.00	3
Saxony	5	1.80	1
Saarland	5	0.80	0
Lower Saxony	5	0.60	0
Hamburg	6	0.50	0
Bremen	5	0.40	0
Hesse	5	0.40	0
North Rhine-Westphalia	5	0.40	0
Schleswig-Holstein	5	0.40	0
Baden-Württemberg	4	0.00	0
Bavaria	5	0.00	0
Rhineland-Palatinate	4	0.00	0

Finally, Table 6 breaks the time period of the previous table into three decades (1981 to 1990, et cetera), and then compares the scores of the FDP, Greens, and PDS/*Die Linke* both overall and separately for the ten Western and six Eastern *Länder*. To be precise, these are the

mean scores for all elections in the given years. West Berlin elections are grouped with the Western *Länder* through 1989. For the PDS, the first time period in fact is only for the year 1990. In that year there were four elections in Western *Länder* and an election in each of the six Eastern *Länder* — thus the greater number of elections in the East pulls up its overall average.

TABLE 6: PERIOD AVERAGES OF PIVOTAL SCORES

	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010
FDP	1.43	0.92	1.91
West	1.28	1.38	2.05
East	2.17	0.00	1.67
Greens	1.83	2.06	1.94
West	1.83	2.75	2.36
East	1.83	0.67	1.17
PDS/ <i>Die Linke</i>	1.80	1.06	1.88
West	0.00	0.00	0.82
East	3.00	3.17	3.83

Looking at the data, one sees that in the current context, that is, the 2001 to 2010 decade, the FDP, Greens, and *Die Linke* are in fact almost equally pivotal in terms of *Land* election results — even if not in terms of ideological compatibility. In the 1990s and particularly after 1998 it seemed for a while as though a bipolar party system (pitting CDU/CSU and FDP against SPD and Greens) had developed federally and in the Western *Länder*. Even during this period, though, there was not perfect bipolarity — most notably because of the SPD-FDP government in Rhineland-Palatinate which lasted from 1991 until 2006. Moreover, since 2005 and the emergence of *Die Linke*, a party that is competitive all over Germany (it is currently represented in thirteen of the sixteen *Länder*), a five-party system is gradually becoming the norm in Germany.<sup>23</sup> That said, the three smaller parties have taken different evolutions to their current similar pivotal roles.

For the FDP, the historical pivot party, even by the 1980s their role had weakened at the *Land* level to the point where they had fallen behind the Greens. Indeed, in the 1981 to 1990 decade the FDP began to frequently be excluded from *Landtage* inasmuch as their vote share fell below the five percent hurdle in various *Land* elections — eleven during this period. Interestingly, all of these were elections in Western *Länder*; the elections in the Eastern *Länder* in 1990 were a success for the FDP in that they achieved representation everywhere and a low to moderate pivotal role in most Eastern *Länder*. In the 1991 to 2000 decade, however, the FDP's pivotal role effectively bottomed out overall. It did not win representation in a single election in the Eastern *Länder*, and also failed to be represented in almost half of the *Land* elections in the West (11 of 24). By the 2001 to 2010 decade the FDP had become more successful in the Western and especially the Eastern *Länder* compared to the previous decade (not only because they were in opposition federally from 1998 until late 2009 but also because they used that time

effectively to rejuvenate themselves organizationally and programmatically<sup>24</sup>) — although still nowhere near their historical pivotal role. For the Greens, there is less overall variation across these decades but the 1991 to 2000 decade still stands out as their high water mark in terms of *Land* pivot roles – at least in the West. Like the FDP, though, their support and thus pivot role in the new Eastern *Länder* quickly dropped off (and indeed was almost nonexistent outside of Berlin). It has recovered a bit in the East but not as much as that of the FDP. In the Western *Länder*, the Greens have remained consistently more pivotal overall than the FDP — although their large lead over the FDP in this regard in the 1991 to 2000 decade has become much smaller. As for the PDS/*Die Linke*, their initially medium pivotal role in the Eastern *Länder* has become high, and they even now have some coalition relevance in certain Western *Länder*.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of pivotal parties in the German party system since 1961. Historically the main pivotal party in the (West) German party system has been the Free Democratic Party. During the heyday of West Germany's two-and-a-half party system (from the early 1960s to the early 1980s) the FDP was the kingmaker, the party that more often than not could decide which one of the two major parties (CDU/CSU or SPD) would be in government. Unless they won a majority of seats in the legislature or were willing to enter a 'grand coalition', the major parties had to court the FDP in order to form a viable coalition government. In the early 1980s, however, the situation began to change. The Green party won seats at the *Land* and federal levels and thus increasingly established itself as a pivotal player and a potential challenger to the FDP in this regard.

Initially the Greens could not translate their growing clout and favourable opportunity structure into the same frequent stints in government that the FDP managed to achieve. Rather, the Greens' internal fights over the question whether the party should coalesce with any established party at all and then later their exclusive cooperative arrangements with the SPD made the party seem much less pivotal than the FDP, which after all had successfully collaborated with both of the main centre-right and centre-left parties. However, over time the Greens not only streamlined their internal party organization but also broadened their programmatic stance to include more policy areas (e.g., economic, social and education policy) in addition to their traditional focus on environmental and foreign/defence policy.<sup>25</sup> Moreover,

‘their ‘New Green’ pragmatism implies a shift from the old preference for radical demands and ideological purity towards a new taste for practicable policy suggestions recognizing tight economic constraints’ [in order to] ‘overcome excessive reliance on the eco-libertarian and post-materialist social movement sector and to move towards the liberal and post-ideological centre ground.’<sup>26</sup>

This ‘repositioning’ has opened up additional coalition options for the Greens. Beginning in 1994 formal cooperative arrangements with the CDU had increasingly been established at the municipal level. In 2008 the first CDU-Green coalition was established at the *Land*-level in Hamburg. The formation of the CDU-FDP-Green coalition in Saarland in 2009 illustrates another strategic advantage that the Greens now enjoy in the increasingly fragmented German party system. Since three party coalitions are becoming ever more common, it is significant that

the Greens are the only party that is included in all of the three most-likely combinations, namely the traffic light coalition (SPD, FDP, Greens), the ‘Jamaica’ coalition (CDU, FDP, Greens), and the red-red-green coalition (SPD, *Die Linke*, Greens).<sup>27</sup>

The PDS emerged on the political scene after reunification as a successor to East Germany’s ruling communist party (SED) and soon became a significant force in the party systems of the new *Länder*. Initially its historical baggage made it a pariah amongst the mainstream parties. Over time the PDS adopted a mix of populist anti-capitalist and left-libertarian policies and portrayed itself as the chief defender of East German interests in the newly unified country. While this enabled the party to become a powerful player in the new *Länder* it ensured its irrelevance in the West of the country. This would change in 2005 when the SPD suffered from significant defections of left-wing members as a result of its controversial social and labour market reform policies (*Agenda 2010*). The defectors formed a new political party (WASG) and quickly established relations with the PDS in order to cooperate in the run-up to the federal election of that year. This successful cooperation would eventually lead to the merger of the two parties and the creation of *Die Linke* in 2007. Unlike the PDS the ‘new’ party has a truly national profile and is increasingly becoming a pivotal player not just in the East but also in West Germany and at the federal level. The main problem for the PDS/*Die Linke* has been the fact that it was long excluded from the government formation process by the other parties. It was not until 1994 that the SPD was willing to rely on external PDS support to maintain a minority coalition with the Greens. The first formal coalition between SPD and PDS was not formed until 1998 in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Similar red-red coalitions were eventually established in Berlin in 2002 and in Brandenburg in 2009. While the PDS/*Die Linke* can now certainly be considered as a potential partner for the SPD in the new *Länder*, the situation is not yet quite the same in the West where an attempt at forming a SPD-*Die Linke*-Green coalition in Hesse failed in 2009 due to the refusal of two SPD *Landtag* members to support such a government.<sup>28</sup>

In this paper we tried to move beyond individual-case based anecdotal evidence and to find a way to actually measure the pivotal role of a party both federally and in each *Land*. For that purpose we developed and calculated a five-point ‘opportunity structure’ scale. The findings of our analysis show that based on that policy-blind measure the Greens have at least equaled if not even surpassed the FDP as the country’s main pivotal party since they emerged on the political scene in the early 1980s. Although they were not able to fully take advantage of that propitious opportunity structure, the recently formed coalitions with the CDU and FDP in two *Länder* may indicate a change in that regard.<sup>29</sup>

While the Greens have now opened themselves up to possible cooperative arrangements with the parties on the centre-right of the political spectrum, the FDP has become more dependent on the CDU/CSU, especially since the FDP’s adoption of its more neo-liberal 1997 *Wiesbaden* programme. After all, the party’s unwillingness to consider an *Ampel* coalition with the SPD and the Greens after the 2005 federal elections ultimately encouraged the SPD to form a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats instead.<sup>30</sup> After the 2010 elections in North-Rhine Westphalia the FDP once again rebuffed SPD advances and opted for the opposition benches instead.<sup>31</sup> These developments (on the part of the Greens and the FDP) have considerably weakened not only the strategic options available to the FDP but also those existing for the SPD. It would thus not be surprising to see the Social Democrats open themselves up to further red-red coalitions with *Die Linke* both in the West German *Länder* and at the federal level (where such relationships have so far been frowned upon). This would obviously also improve *Die Linke*’s

chances of getting into government. Indeed, this is a development that may eventually even result in the formation of a successful red-red-green coalition in the West like the one currently pondered in North-Rhine Westphalia.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David P. Conrads, *The German Polity*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2005), pp. 170-176; Melanie Haas, Uwe Jun and Oskar Niedermayer, 'Die Parteien und Parteiensysteme der Bundesländer – Eine Einführung', Uwe Jun, Melanie Haas and Oskar Niedermayer (eds), *Parteien und Parteiensysteme in den deutschen Ländern* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008), pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> Conrads, *The German Polity*, pp. 124-144; Rolf Steltemeier, 'On the Way Back into Government? The Free Democratic Party Gearing Up for the 2009 Elections', *German Politics and Society* 27/2 (Summer 2009), pp.63-75.

<sup>3</sup> Conrads, *The German Polity*, pp. 144-145; Frank Decker and Florian Hartleb, 'Populism on Difficult Terrain: The Right- and Left-Wing Challenger Parties in the Federal Republic of Germany', *German Politics* 16/4 (December 2007), pp. 447-451.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Smith, 'Das deutsche Parteiensystem am Wendepunkt?', Heinrich Oberreuter (ed), *Parteiensystem am Wendepunkt? Wahlen in der Fernsehdemokratie* (Landsberg am Lech: Olzog Verlag, 1996), p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> William M. Downs, *Coalition Government, Subnational Style: Multiparty Politics in Europe's Regional Parliaments* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p. 134; Charlie Jeffery, 'Party Politics and Territorial Representation in the Federal Republic of Germany', *West European Politics* 22/2 (April 1999), pp. 130-166; Geoffrey K. Roberts, 'Party System Change in West Germany: Land-Federal Linkages', *West European Politics*, 12/4 (October 1989), pp. 98-113.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Padgett and Tony Burkett, *Political Parties and Elections in West Germany: The Search for a New Stability* (London: C. Hurst, 1986), p. 164 [quote from]; Steltemeier, 'On the Way Back into Government? The Free Democratic Party Gearing Up for the 2009 Elections', p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Sør, 'Not Without Us!' The FDP's Survival, Position, and Influence', Peter H. Merkl (ed), *The Federal Republic of Germany at Forty* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), p. 314.

<sup>8</sup> William E. Paterson and David Southern, *Governing Germany* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 210; Smith, 'Das deutsche Parteiensystem am Wendepunkt?', p. 225.

<sup>9</sup> Paterson and Southern, *Governing Germany*, p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> Padgett and Burkett, *Political Parties and Elections in West Germany*, p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> P. G. J. Pulzer, 'Western Germany and the Three Party System', *Political Quarterly*, 33 (1962), p. 426.

<sup>12</sup> Paterson and Southern, *Governing Germany*, p. 210.

<sup>13</sup> Gerd Langguth, *The Green Factor in German Politics: From Protest Movement to Political Party*, Trans. Richard Straus (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 1-21.

<sup>14</sup> Ingolfur Blühdorn, 'New Green' Pragmatism in Germany – Green Politics beyond the Social Democratic Embrace?', *Government and Opposition* 39/4 (September 2004), pp. 568-569.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, 'Das deutsche Parteiensystem am Wendepunkt?', pp. 225-226; Steltemeier, 'On the Way Back into Government? The Free Democratic Party Gearing Up for the 2009 Elections', pp. 71.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Poguntke, ‘Die Bündnisgrünen in der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der SPD?’, Oskar Niedermayer (ed), *Die Parteien nach der Bundestagswahl 1998* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1999), pp. 83-101.

<sup>17</sup> Blühdorn, ‘‘New Green’ Pragmatism in Germany – Green Politics beyond the Social Democratic Embrace?’, pp. 579-582; Willy Jou, ‘The 2008 Hamburg *Bürgerschaftswahl*: Birth of a New Coalition Formula’, *German Politics* 18/1 (March 2009), pp. 96-102.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang G. Gibowski, ‘Election Trends in Germany. An Analysis of the Second General Election in Reunited Germany’, *German Politics*, 4/2 (August 1995), p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Poguntke, ‘Die Bündnisgrünen in der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der SPD?’, pp. 83-91.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Olsen and Dan Hough, ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright: SPD-Left Party/PDS Coalitions in the Eastern German Länder’, *German Politics and Society*, 25/3 (Autumn 2007), pp. 1-24.

<sup>21</sup> Not included therefore are the 1978 to 1980 Land elections for the Greens, but only in three of these did they score more than “0”: 1978: 0 in Hamburg, 0 in Hesse; 1979: 1 in Bremen [first seats in a Landtag]; 1980: 0 in NRW, 1 in BW, 0 in Saarland.

<sup>22</sup> This is in stark contrast to federal elections, though, as the FDP has so far always overcome the 5 percent hurdle at that level.

<sup>23</sup> Clay M. Clemens, ‘The Grand Coalition and a Changing Political Order: Shifting Alliances and a New Era in German Politics’, *The Forum* 5/3 (2007), p. 2-4.

<sup>24</sup> Steltemeier, ‘On the Way Back into Government? The Free Democratic Party Gearing Up for the 2009 Elections’, p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> Ingolfur Blühdorn, ‘Reinventing Green Politics: On the Strategic Repositioning of the German Green Party’, *German Politics*, 18/1 (March 2009), pp. 49.

<sup>26</sup> Blühdorn, ‘‘New Green’ Pragmatism in Germany – Green Politics beyond the Social Democratic Embrace?’, p. 566.

<sup>27</sup> Blühdorn, ‘‘New Green’ Pragmatism in Germany – Green Politics beyond the Social Democratic Embrace?’, p. 580; Ingolfur Blühdorn, ‘Option Grün: Alliance 90/The Greens at the Dawn of New Opportunities?’, *German Politics and Society*, 27/2 (Summer 2009), pp. 46-47.

<sup>28</sup> Decker and Hartleb, ‘Populism on Difficult Terrain: The Right- and Left-Wing Challenger Parties in the Federal Republic of Germany’, pp. 447-451; Olsen and Hough, ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright: SPD-Left Party/PDS Coalitions in the Eastern German Länder’, pp. 1-24.

<sup>29</sup> Blühdorn, ‘Option Grün: Alliance 90/The Greens at the Dawn of New Opportunities?’, pp. 45-62; Blühdorn, ‘Reinventing Green Politics: On the Strategic Repositioning of the German Green Party’, pp. 36-54.

<sup>30</sup> Clemens, ‘The Grand Coalition and a Changing Political Order: Shifting Alliances and a New Era in German Politics’, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Der Spiegel*, ‘Angebot an SPD und Grüne: FDP lässt die Ampel blinken,’ <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,694293,00.html> (accessed on May 11, 2010); *Der Spiegel*, ‘Koalitionspoker: FDP-Fraktion sagt Ampel-Gespräche mit Kraft ab,’ <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,694668,00.html> (accessed on May 13, 2010); *Der Spiegel*, ‘Ampel



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<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,694825,00.html> (accessed on May 14, 2010).