



# The SPD's coalition moment?

Germany's changing political landscape might prove highly advantageous for the SPD if new coalition formulas are pursued

Charles Lees

---

The German party system has become increasingly fragmented. Since the 1970s the two big “catch-all” parties, the SPD and CDU/CSU, have seen their combined vote share decline from a high point of 91.2 per cent of the vote in 1972 to the all-time low of 56.8 per cent they won in the 2009 federal election. This decline has been particularly marked for the SPD, from a high of 45.8 per cent in 1972, it fell to 38.2 per cent in 1983, 37 per cent in 1987, and 33.5 per cent in 1990. The trend was temporarily reversed under the leadership of Gerhard Schröder but has since continued, culminating in the historic low of 23 per cent of the votes that the SPD won in 2009. At the same time, the traditional role of the liberal FDP as coalition “kingmaker” has been fatally undermined by the emergence and consolidation within the party system of the Greens after 1983 and the PDS (now the Left Party) after 1990.

The cumulative impact of these changes has been to shift the centre of ideological gravity to the left and also change the dynamics of coalition building in Germany. On the one hand, coalition building is now more difficult and less predictable for the catch-all parties and they must do so from a greatly reduced electoral base. On the other, the catch-all parties are less vulnerable than they were in the past to small party threats of a decisive defection to an alternative coalition. Moreover, because of their relative ideological positions, the smaller parties cannot easily act in concert to extract concessions from either of the two catch-all parties. These factors are potentially highly advantageous to the SPD. The 2009 election was an enormous set-back for the party but, given the potential coalition options open to it, the SPD has the opportunity to lead Germany's fragmented left back to power.

## The coalition environment

Germany now has a genuinely multi-party system in which three smaller parties are able to find niche positions within a party system that is structured by a dominant left-right ideological dimension, cross-cut by a libertarian-authoritarian dimension. As would be expected, the two Catch-all parties occupy the centre-left and centre-right of the dominant left-right dimension.

All in all, given the right legislative mathematics, the current dynamics of the German party system allows for nine mathematically feasible coalition options: the Grand Coalition (CDU/CSU-SPD); Black-Yellow (CDU/CSU-FDP); Black-Green (CDU/CSU-Greens); “Jamaica” (CDU/CSU-FDP-Greens); Red-Green (SPD-Greens); Social-Liberal (SPD-FDP); Red-Red (SPD-Left Party); Red-Red-Green (SPD-Left Party-Greens); and “Traffic Light” (SPD-Greens-FDP). However, self-restrictions imposed by the parties themselves mean that there are currently only five politically feasible options:

- Grand Coalition
- Black-Yellow
- Black-Green
- Jamaica
- Red-Green

Only one of these (Red-Green) could be argued to be a coalition of the left and the task for the SPD, therefore, is to manage the process of integrating the Left Party into the political mainstream; thus allowing for the option of a ‘Red-Red’ coalition between the SPD and Left Party (or even between the

SPD, Greens, and Left Party). This is a task that will take political courage and strategic imagination and the template for it can be found in the experience of government coalitions at the level of the German states and in the development of the so-called “Red-Green model” of political co-operation.

### **State-level government**

State-level government provides an ideal laboratory for new political arrangements. There are two reasons for this. First, from 1990 until very recently, there was a strong territorial cleavage in Germany that expressed itself most clearly at the state level. In most of the old federal states there was what was effectively a two-bloc system, made up of four parties (the Greens, SPD, FDP, and CDU/CSU) and in most of the new federal states of the former East Germany there was a three-party system made up of the PDS/Left Party, SPD, and CDU. The Left Party has now also made inroads into western states such as Saarland, thus re-enforcing the basic truth of state-level politics; that the sometimes unusual legislative mathematics thrown up by state-level elections compel parties to be less restrictive in their choices of potential coalition partners.

Second, state-level governments in Germany have two main sets of competences: their relatively routine “own” competences (enforcing federal traffic laws, federal emission control laws, waste disposal, and much EU legislation) and the sometimes more controversial “delegated competences” (the administration of federal motorways, some major taxes, and strategically important policy areas such as the management of nuclear power) that they take on behalf of the Federal government. Crucially, however, they are not responsible for “high politics” policy areas such as foreign policy, federal finance, defence, and so on, which are the responsibility of the Federal government. This means that new coalitions – and especially of coalitions of the left – can be parlayed and developed over time without touching on “third rail” issues such as defence.

### **Red-Green coalitions**

It is no surprise, therefore, that the history of Red-Green coalitions in Germany is one in which the SPD and Greens were able to develop a model of co-operation that was based on the selective emphasis of “new politics” issues (such as environmental protection, group rights, and gender equality) around which the two parties could find common ground whilst being able to ignore many of the high politics issues, such as defence and security, that divided them. This process started with periods of unofficial co-operation between the SPD and Greens in Hamburg and Hesse in the early 1980s, as well as formal Red-Green coalitions in Hesse itself, West Berlin, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and North Rhine Westphalia, as well as a minority Red-Green coalition (“tolerated” by the PDS) in Saxony-Anhalt. In addition there were two rather unsuccessful “Traffic-Light” coalitions in Brandenburg (with Alliance 90 and the FDP) and Bremen (with the Greens and the FDP). The end result of this process of co-operation was the formal coalition agreement between the SPD and Greens at the federal level that made possible the Red-Green coalition, under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, that governed Germany between 1998 and 2005. Crucially, however, the Greens dropped their principled objection to Germany’s NATO membership in the run-up to the 1998 election, thus eliminating the most important barrier to their participation in national government. Nevertheless, the issue of German foreign policy – most notably German involvement in the 1999 Kosovo campaign – remained an area of intense conflict between elements of the Greens’ leadership and between the leadership and grass roots. Inevitably, this also had negative externalities for coalition management more broadly.

### **Towards a Red-Red coalition?**

Twenty years after unification, the Left Party is now an established player within the German party system nationally, it enjoys something like Catch-all party status in the states of the former East Germany and can now also boast a degree of penetration into the western states of Germany as well. The SPD and other mainstream parties no longer use the explicit language of the past, when labels

such as “ex-Stasi”, the “Eastern League”, the “nostalgic association”, or even “Red Polished Fascists” were deployed to demonise what was then the PDS and deter its voters, but the Left Party is still excluded in real-world coalition calculations at the Federal level. Nevertheless, there are successful Red-Red coalitions in place in the states of Brandenburg and Berlin (where the coalition has overseen a process of drastic budgetary consolidation), as well as previously in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. In addition, the PDS “tolerated” a minority SPD government in Saxony –Anhalt between 1994 and 2002 and recently tried unsuccessfully to do the same in the western state of Saarland.

This pattern of co-operation at the state level, balanced by a frostiness at the Federal level, is reminiscent of the 15-year process that preceded the formation of the Red-Green coalition in 1998. In most areas of state-level policy and much of that at the federal level, the SPD and Left Party are in broad agreement but, as with the Greens, there are certain policy positions (such as its hostility to NATO) that the Left Party will have to moderate or downplay in order to become a feasible coalition partner in Federal government. Where the parallel between the Left Party and the Greens breaks down, however, is that whereas opposition to the integration of the Greens soon lost its emotional edge and came to focus on concrete policy differences, disapproval of the Left Party still possesses a visceral quality. Within the SPD, this emotiveness has taken three forms. First, it has harked back to institutional memories of the so-called or “enforced merger”, in which the faction of the SPD under Russian occupation, led by Otto Grotewohl, merged with the Communist KPD to form the SED. Second, and related to this previous point, it is often grounded in a more general disapproval of the East German regime from which the PDS originally emerged. More recently, however, SPD opposition to engagement with the Left Party has fixated on the role within the party of Oskar Lafontaine, the former SPD Minister President of Saarland and Federal Finance Minister, who is considered a turncoat by many SPD activists.

In a sense, this shift in the focus of SPD hostility is encouraging, as it represents a “normalisation” of the relationship, in which differences are personal or ideological rather than historical in nature. It remains to be seen whether the decision of Oskar Lafontaine to step down from front-line politics for health reasons will soften this strand of SPD opposition to co-operation with the Left Party. For the sake of a fragmented left, however, it is a softening that must take place.

**Dr. Charles Lees is a senior lecturer in the Department of Politics at Sheffield University. He is also secretary of the Association for the Study of German Politics (ASGP)**

*Policy Network will launch a major new research programme on “The ideological renewal of European Social Democracy – A new revisionism for the 21st century” in Amsterdam on 30th June- 1 July*