Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
Electoral Studies 25 (2006) 791–807
Electoral Studies
www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

'Dead men walking?' Party identification in Germany, 1977–2002

Kai Arzheimer*

Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Colonel-Kleinmann-Weg 2, D-55099 Mainz, Germany

Abstract

Scholars engaged in the discourse on 'Parteienverdrossenheit' claim that a breakdown of party attachments in West Germany occurred during the early 1990s. Employing data from a series of monthly polls that were conducted from 1977 to 2002, this paper demonstrates that the notion of such a rapid decline is wrong. Rather than being swept away by political crises, party identification declines slowly and fairly constantly over time, which is in line with theories of a secular dealignment. Furthermore, it can be shown that this dealignment is driven by a weakening of traditional social ties, while cognitive mobilization and change in the composition of the society have no effect on partisanship. The decline is most pronounced among the working class.

Keywords: Party identification; Dealignment; West Germany; Longitudinal data

1. Introduction

Since 1949, German political parties have apparently operated under very favorable conditions. One of the foremost articles of the Federal Constitution (which was framed almost exclusively by former party politicians who survived the terror of the Nazis) secures them a guaranteed role in the political process and grants them special privileges.[1] More important

* Fax: +49 6131 39 22996.
E-mail address: arzheimer@politik.uni-mainz.de
URL: http://www.politik.uni-mainz.de/kai.arzheimer/

[1] Unlike other political or non-political associations, a party can only be dissolved if a super-majority in the Federal Constitutional Court rules that it works against democracy. This has happened only twice during the Federal Republic's early years when both the neo-fascist *Sozialistische Reichspartei* (SRP) and the communist *Kommunistische Partei* (KPD) were banned.

0261-3794/$ - see front matter © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2006.01.004

for their day-to-day business is an extensive system of state-funding[2] and their de-facto control over access to the electoral arena.[3] Last not least, they have gained much more than a foothold in the higher ranks of the civil service, including the public broadcasters that still control a large share of the radio and TV market. Despite the traditional anti-partisan affect that had troubled the German polity since the 19th century, the Federal Republic clearly evolved into a party state during the 1950s.

While parties as institutions flourished, there is empirical evidence that citizens took a skeptical view of parties and party politicians during the post-war period (see Kepplinger, 1998: 23–26 for an overview). But by the 1970s, the new arrangements were widely accepted by the public. Not only had the Christian Democrats[4] (CDU/CSU), Social Democrats (SPD) and Liberal Democrats (FDP)—the only parties represented in the federal parliament from 1961–1983, collectively known as 'Bonner Parteien' after the former seat of the federal government—gained sizable numbers of new members by then. They also had managed to attract a combined share of 99% of the vote all through the 1970s, with turnout exceeding 90% of those eligible to vote. Given the considerable degree of fragmentation in the Weimar Republic's and the early Federal Republic's party system and the fact that Germany's electoral system is basically proportional, this success is even more impressive. Looking back, the 1970s were obviously a golden age of party government in Germany.

This not withstanding, the late 1970s also gave rise to a new discourse of crisis, not unlike the older discourse on 'ungovernability', in which political scientists, politicians, and citizens alike have been involved ever since then. This discourse centers on the notion of 'Verdrossenheit' in its numerous varieties, among which 'Politikverdrossenheit', 'Parteienverdrossenheit', and 'Politikerverdrossenheit' (disaffection with politics, parties, and party politicians, henceforth simply Parteienverdrossenheit; see Eilfort (1996) for an attempt to translate this terminology) are the most notorious. More than 180 chapters, refereed articles, and scientific monographs have been published on the subject since 1977, with their numbers still growing (Arzheimer, 2002).

Ironically, the unexpected unification of East and West Germany in 1990, which was meant to be the biggest success of the established West German parties, has apparently boosted this disaffection. Not only had the mere existence of the GDR helped to curb political criticism and desire for fundamental change. Moreover, political decisions and statements made in the transformation process fueled public discontent in the years after 1990. Instead of preparing Germany for 'blood, toil, tears, and sweat', the government lead by Helmut Kohl had promised that East Germany would turn into 'flowering landscapes' within ten years, and that every German citizen would be better off than before unification. As the economic upswing failed to materialize and the unemployment rate in East Germany soared up almost immediately after unification, parties and politicians were framed in public discourses more often than not as

[2] While in theory up to 50% of their income may come from the treasury, this share is quite often even higher once tax and other benefits are considered.

[3] The last successful independent candidates for the federal parliament ran in 1949.

[4] There are actually two Christian democratic parties: The *Christlich Soziale Union* (CSU), which is restricted to the *Land* of Bavaria, and the larger *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU), which runs candidates in all other *Länder*. Since the two parties do not compete and have always formed a common delegation in the federal parliament, they are treated as one single party to which I refer to as CDU/CSU for brevity's sake.