

# A New Government – A New Democracy? The Red–Green Coalition in Germany

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## 1 Prolegomenon

With the 1989 eclipse of communist ideology and power in Central and Eastern Europe, the political order of democracy has, on the one hand, proved to be the superior way of organizing a society where in politics the pluralist interests of the people can be articulated and represented freely without fear of repression through competitive elections and otherwise, and where particularly through the operation of market mechanisms citizens are furnished with reasonably satisfactory economic circumstances to conduct their everyday lives. On the other hand, quite different from what many contemporary observers had anticipated, liberal democracy has been subjected to closer and closer critical internal scrutiny, and with this also alternate conceptions of how to organize a democratic polity are now more than before a matter of debate and controversy.

Political parties in democracies have come to be accepted as indispensable collective actors which not the least through competitive elections mediate between government and the electorate. This elevated role for political parties is, for instance, reflected in the German constitution (Grundgesetz – Basic Law) which formulates in Article 21.2 that political parties participate (wirken mit) in the formation of the public will. There is systematic empirical evidence accumulating that the capability of parties to penetrate society through linkages with social groups like churches or trade unions and through party membership at least in Western Europe are on the wane (Poguntke, 1999). Provided that this diagnosis is correct, little consolation for this pitiful and consequential state of affairs can as of now be obtained from political thinkers when it comes to reflecting on realistic functional equivalents for parties or

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even on a completely new institutional architecture for democracies where parties would no longer have an important place or even a place at all.

Especially in Europe with its multitude of nation states and its institutional, social, and cultural diversity many nation-specific approaches have emerged over the last two centuries about how to best cope with the challenges originating from the modernisation process. However, according to comparative analyses, not all institutional and procedural options for organizing a democratic polity are equally well capable of solving problems like too little economic growth, unemployment, a lacking role for women in society, and internal strife (Lijphart, 1999). Therefore, of particular interest for political science is an answer to the question: which type of democracy is best capable of sustaining the acceptance and support of its citizenry? Here, one focus of debate has been the confrontation of parliamentary versus presidential systems, with the verdict slightly in favour of the former (Lijphart, 1992; Linz and Valenzuela, 1994). Another controversy along similar lines rages with respect to the question whether majoritarian or consociational/consensual democracies perform better (Lijphart, 1994, 1999). These are not trivial questions given the fact that in the transformation societies of Central and Eastern Europe intelligent constitutional engineering was asked for, and effective democratic government is one of the most important conditions for achieving democratic legitimacy.

Katz (1987: 4) has pointed to the fact that ‘in the party government ideal, total control of the government is turned over to a team of leaders who are entitled to exercise power by virtue of having obtained the approbation of a majority in a freely contested election’. From this, three core elements of party government can be extracted: free competitive elections, homogeneous parties, and government control. As the reference by Katz to an ideal type already signals, things in reality are much more complex. This is why Sjöblom (1987: 156–157) speaks of the dimensions of partyness of government (degree of party control of the government), party governmentness as degree of party penetration in social power relations and partyness of society regarding the role of parties in society.

Like a red thread in his work, Peter Pulzer’s reflections on democratic government emphasize that party government must be *responsible* in that any government can be made accountable for its decisions by the citizenry in elections (Pulzer, 1978, 1982, 1987). In his thinking, he clearly associates an accountable government with the Westminster model of Britain when he sees responsible party government enhanced by a unitary constitution, a unicameral legislature as well as an overlap between executive and legislative functions and hampered especially by strong pressure groups (Pulzer, 1982: 10–11, 13). At this point the impact of the electoral system must be considered. While Pulzer is cautious not to overemphasize its role for responsible party government, he leaves little doubt that stable governments are conducive for a well-operating democracy, and, while majority rule is not the *deus ex machina* which all by itself produces this stability, he at least regards it as an important element which can help to promote it (there is a certain irony in the fact that a pillar in the

Westminster model – the electoral system of first past the post – is up for change in the report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System asked for in 1997 by the Labour government; see Independent Commission on the Voting System, 1998).

Lijphart in his initial work on typologizing democracies (1984: 211–222), but also more recently 1999: 9–47, 243–257), comes up with two dimensions (operationalized by five institutional variables each) according to which democracies can be succinctly characterized. In his newest publication (1999: 3), he terms these two dimensions the executives-parties dimension (epitomized by the two-party systems versus multi-party systems dichotomy) and the federal-unitary dimension. He can show that the validity of this classification does not only hold up for his previous (1984) set of 22 democracies, but also for a larger set of 36.

In his earlier work, he had classified Germany as majoritarian-federal (Lijphart, 1984: 216), but his own data did not fully support his classification even then. Instead, it would have been more appropriate to place Germany into an intermediate category because it scored much lower than for example the United Kingdom and the United States on majoritarianism (the factor which is almost identical with the effective number of parties), and this is what his 1999 analysis now shows very clearly (Lijphart, 1999: 248).

The typological placement of Germany based on Lijphart's classification pertains to the politico-institutional realm. But the heightened emphasis on the more consensual elements in the overall political makeup of Germany also squares neatly with Katzenstein's look at Germany as a semi-sovereign state. He summarizes the findings from his study well (Katzenstein, 1987: 385):

The three nodes of West Germany's policy network open the state to the influence of parties, subordinate levels of government, and interest groups. But in fusing state and society, these nodes are also conduits in the formulation and implementation of policy. Since it links tightly most of the major organized political actors, thus multiplying potential sources of veto, West Germany's semisovereign state is not well equipped to initiate bold policy change. But by its very structure, West Germany's semisovereign state is well suited to bring about steady, incremental policy change.

It is against this background that the result of the German general election of 27 September 1999, and its ensuing government change will be discussed. But before this topic is approached, two rather persistent elements in the German political process must be addressed which rank highly in Peter Pulzer's thinking: coalition governments and federalism.

## 2 How Accountable is the German Way of Governing?

The most important functional systems structure their communication through a binary code which under the perspective of the specific function in question demands universal validity and excludes third options . . . Regarding the political system . . . the code is defined by the concentration

of power in the hands of the state . . . One can only hold or not hold positions in parliament, government and administration, and therefore politics is coded according to government and opposition . . . (Luhmann, 1986: 75–76, 169–170; translation M.K.)

In his systemic perspective, Luhmann has pointed to one element long regarded as essential for a well-working democratic process: the institutionalization of the chance for a role change between government and opposition. Problems may be solved or not be solved by a given government, and while in modern societies the struggle for government power is increasingly fought by the contending parties for finding the appropriate means to successfully deal with a given problem (valence issues) and less so for political ends (position issues), there is nevertheless widespread agreement that it is the threat of being thrown out to those who control the government at a given point in time and the promise to those out of power to in the future obtain this position which are the central moving forces behind whether and how parties and politicians act in a party democracy. It is, therefore, not just by chance that Huntington (1991: 266–267) in his work on regime transitions tests democratic consolidation by the two-turnover test: there have to be at least two peaceful government turnovers through free elections before a democracy can be considered consolidated.

Since democracies depend on the free acceptance by and the support of their citizens, expressed not the least in regular elections, the logic of government and opposition roles makes it likely that the chance that those citizens who adhere to any one of the present opposition parties are quasi-naturally more dissatisfied with the government than are those who adhere to the governing parties (convincing empirical evidence for this claim is provided by Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson, 1995: 345; Anderson and Guillory, 1997). This situation is obviously aggravated if a particular government stays in office for an extended period of time. However, the resulting potential threat to democracy is if not neutralized but reduced by the fact that citizens distinguish between support for the democratic system as such and for the incumbent authorities (Kaase and Newton, 1995). The question nevertheless arises at what point and under which circumstances dissatisfaction with *government* is generalized to dissatisfaction with the *democratic system*. Therefore, it is once more the concept of government turnover through elections and its role in the democratic process by generating citizen support not only for the incumbents, but also for the polity which comes to the fore.

One controversial debate in electoral studies is whether people judge the performance of a government retrospectively or prospectively. This controversy does not need to be discussed here in any detail (for a sophisticated empirical analysis of this problem based on longitudinal data from 16 democracies see McDonald, Budge, and Hofferbert, 1999). What is important is the assumption underlying both perspectives, namely that governments are held responsible for their actions by the people, especially during election periods (Anderson, 1995a); McDonald, Budge, and

Hofferbert (1999) show that with respect to the impact of economic conditions on the vote the clarity of government alternatives does indeed make a big difference. This, then, leads to the question of how an accountability situation can be best institutionally secured, which in the logic of the democratic process is so central for establishing creativity, innovation, and political control.

If accountability in politics means that decisions taken by governments and associated agencies in them have an unequivocal addressee, be the outcomes of those decisions positive or negative for the citizenry, then – and even the consensualist Lijphart (1999: 288–289) has to admit to this – two-party systems are best suited to create this state of affairs. But in the real world of contemporary democratic politics pure two-party systems are rare, and even in Britain as the epitome of the Westminster model, in the May 1997 general election the two major parties of Conservative and Labour gained 74 per cent of the votes though 88.6 per cent of the seats, while the Liberal democrats obtained 16.8 per cent of the votes and 7 per cent of the seats, and the remaining, mostly regional parties got 9.2 per cent of the votes and 4.4 per cent of the seats (Wood, 199: 147, 151).

Lijphart here (1999: 288) makes the obviously valid point that in this kind of a ‘two-party system’ a government may even be kept in office against a majority of voters. However this argument is ill-taken under an accountability perspective; what is relevant is the fact that during and at the end of a parliamentary cycle the voters with a one-party government always know beyond any reasonable doubt which party to blame should policy outputs not be to their liking. (This accountability assessment may become more complex, though, if there exist conditions like a strong system of pressure groups which interfere with political decision making; see Pulzer, 1982: 10–13.)

Transferring this line of thinking to Germany, one has to keep in mind that at no time since 1949 has the Federal Republic been governed by a one-party cabinet; from 1949 on various smaller parties – most noteworthy the Free Democrats (FDP) – have teamed up with a major party, either the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) or the Social Democrats (SPD), the only exception being the time of the ‘Great’ (CDU/CSU–SPD) Coalition between 1966 and 1969. Thus, accountability as defined above has all through the existence of the Federal Republic been reduced substantially, and indeed in the past a standard reaction by governing parties in a coalition to criticism has been to blame the ‘other’ partner in government for policy measures not being taken although found desirable or necessary.

There may even have been issues where such a claim has been well-taken and was as such perceived by the media and the public at large, like between 1994 and 1998 when the FDP tried to implement a modern immigration law but could not overcome the CDU/CSU opposition against it. More frequent, however, are instances where the blame situation is less clear-cut, and this is especially true when the second structural factor in the German political system comes to the fore, which has an impact on government accountability: the German variant of cooperative federalism.

This is not the place to discuss, in detail, the multi-faceted nature of German federalism (for a general analysis of this complex topic, see Lehbruch, (1998); under the perspective of responsible party government this is also considered by Pulzer, (1978: 602–606; 1982: 31–32)). In the essential area of law-making, the German constitution distinguishes between laws for which the consent of the states (Länder) is deemed necessary, and laws for which the national parliament (Bundestag) has the unrestricted authority at least in principle (in the three parliamentary periods between 1980 and 1990 an average of about 56 per cent of the laws were classified as requiring the approval of both parliamentary chambers, see *Verwaltung des Deutschen Bundestages*, 1994: 803–937; here: 825). This complex accountability situation is aggravated by the fact that, according to Article 77 of the Basic Law, a distinction needs to be made between the so-called *Einspruchsgesetzgebung* (a law proposed, e.g. by the government and supported by the Bundestag majority, does not require the consent of the federal chamber (Bundesrat), but can be eventually rejected by the Bundesrat anyway) and the *Zustimmungsgesetzgebung* (a law proposed, e.g. by the government and supported by the Bundestag majority, does require the consent of the Bundesrat majority; for a detailed analysis of the political implications of the federalized element in the national legislative process, see König, 1999).

The required cooperation between the Bundestag and the Bundesrat is complex enough to safely assume that is little understood by the average citizen. This policy networking (*Politikverflechtung*; see Scharpf *et al.*, 1976; Scharpf, 1994; Lehbruch, 1998: 90–135), even more so than coalition governments, is a structural hindrance for political accountability, a problem which is accentuated by a regulation in Article 77 Basic Law that in case the Bundestag and the Bundesrat cannot agree on a given law a reconciliation committee (*Vermittlungsausschuß*) can be called into action with the goal of settling the conflict. While this committee was not activated very frequently between 1983 and 1991 (*Verwaltung des Deutschen Bundestages*, 1994: 858), the situation can vary; for the period 1972–1976, as Pulzer (1978: 604) observes, the *Vermittlungsausschuß* was more active than in all other parliamentary periods before taken together. An additional aspect, though, is even more important than this variability. Recent experience corroborates the view that this committee is often involved with respect to legislation which is particularly important for the policy of the national government, like its 1997 efforts for tax reform.

The institutional tension between the Bundestag and the Bundesrat and the specific variant of German cooperative federalism have been a matter of debate since the foundation of the Federal Republic, and various commissions for constitutional reform have addressed this topic (the last one operating in 1992/93) but with little impact because neither the Bund nor the Länder were much inclined to give up established positions.

In party political terms, the issue had already gained prominence in the year preceding the 1998 general election when the conservative–liberal federal government

accused the SPD and B 90/Greens of blockage politics ('Blockadepolitik') because the voting strength in the Bundesrat enabled the opposition parties to counteract legislation accepted by the government majority in the Bundestag (for a detailed discussion of this problematique see König, 1999). This situation, however, had also arisen before in the 1970s with opposite signs when a SPD–FDP majority in the Bundestag had to face a CDU–CSU majority in the Bundesrat. Since German voters – and this is in part an outcome of *Politikverflechtung* too – use state elections not the least to express their sentiments *vis à vis* the federal government, such a potential blockage situation along party lines is a way of life in German politics. It has to be kept in mind, though, that voting in the Bundesrat also follows specific *Länder* interests in the best tradition of federalism, thereby rendering the situation even more complex for the voters than if it were just a matter of partisan strength in the two chambers. That partisan majorities in both chambers are rather the exception than the rule is exemplified by the fact that the brief period of SPD–B 90/Green majorities in both the Bundestag and the Bundesrat after the 1998 general election has already been 'corrected' regarding the Bundesrat by the outcome of six of the seven state elections following the general election (see table 1). Only in Bremen, which had been ruled for the previous four years by a great coalition, on 6 June, 1999, was the SPD able to hold its ground, but its federal coalition partner B 90/Greens experienced a 4.1 percentage point loss, while the CDU gained 4.5 percentage points, resulting in the continuation of the SPD–CDU coalition. To complete the picture, it must finally be mentioned that also on 13 June, 1999, in the European election both governing parties experienced losses (SPD: –1.5 percentage points, B 90/Greens: –3.7 percentage points) while the CDU/CSU scored considerable gains (+9.9 percentage points).

Interestingly enough, with globalization pressures reaching Germany since the early nineties, German federalism has now become a persistent topic of public debate, reflecting on the need for a change from cooperative to competitive federalism. It must be admitted, however, that in these controversies the democratic notion of enhanced accountability through a better visibility of the division of power between the federal and the state level has at best played an implicit role; economic and fiscal considerations dominate (Ottstadt and Linnartz, 1998).

In sum, then, the prevalence of national coalition governments and German federalism both are factors systematically reducing the chance for non-ambiguous government accountability to the citizenry. Peter Pulzer (1978; 1982) weighs the impact of these two differently. Regarding federalism, he argues that only *de facto* unicameralism is compatible with and conducive to responsible party government. With respect to the first consideration, it is the observed stability of German coalition governments which apparently convinced him (at least in 1978) that in Germany national coalitions have been 'a good deal less ephemeral than the electoral coalitions of Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands which have also tried to combine structured electoral choice with multi-partism' (Pulzer, 1978: 607). However, his

**Table 1.** Results of State (Bundesland) and European Elections since the 1998 General Election (percent)

Parties	<b>Hesse</b>			<b>Bremen</b>			<b>European Election</b>			<b>Saarland</b>		
	1999	1995	1999 /. 1995	1999	1995	1999 /. 1995	1999	1994	1999 /. 1994	1999	1994	1999 /. 1994
SPD <sup>1)</sup>	39.4	38.0	+1.4	45.0	44.1	+0.9	30.7	32.2	-1.5	44.4	49.4	-5.0
B90/Greens	7.2	11.2	-4.0	9.0	13.1	-4.1	6.4	10.1	-3.7	3.2	5.5	-2.3
CDU	43.4	39.2	+4.2	37.1	32.6	+4.5	48.7	38.8	+9.9	45.5	38.6	+6.9
FDP	5.1	7.4	-2.3	2.5	3.4	-0.9	3.0	4.1	-1.1	2.6	2.1	+0.5
PDS	-	-	-	-2.9	2.4	+0.5	5.8	4.7	+1.1	0.8	-	+0.8
Rightwing Parties	2.9	2.3	+0.6	3.3	2.8	+0.5	2.1	4.1	-2.0	1.3	1.4	-0.1
Other Parties	2.0	1.9	+0.1	0.2	1.6	-1.4	3.3	6.0	-2.7	2.2	3.0	-0.8
Total	100	100	-	100	100	-	100	100	-	100	100	-
Turnout	66.4	66.3	+0.1	60.1	68.6	-8.5	45.2	60.0	-14.8	68.7	83.5	-14.8

Parties	<b>Brandenburg</b>			<b>Thuringia</b>			<b>Saxony</b>			<b>Berlin</b>		
	1999	1994	1999 /. 1994	1999	1994	1999 /. 1994	1999	1994	1999 /. 1994	1999	1995	1999 /. 1995
SPD	39.3	54.1	-14.8	18.5	29.6	-11.1	10.7	16.6	-5.9	22.4	23.6	-1.2
B90/Greens	1.9	2.9	-1.0	1.9	4.5	-2.6	2.6	4.1	-1.5	9.9	13.2	-3.3
CDU	26.6	18.7	+7.9	51.0	42.6	+8.4	56.9	58.1	-1.2	40.8	37.4	+3.4
FDP	1.9	2.2	-0.3	1.1	3.2	-2.1	1.1	1.7	-0.6	2.2	2.5	-0.3
PDS	23.3	18.7	+4.6	21.4	16.6	+4.8	22.2	16.5	+5.7	17.7	14.6	+3.1
Rightwing Parties	6.0	1.1	+4.9	3.9	1.3	+2.6	2.9	1.3	+1.6	3.5	2.7	+0.8
Other Parties	1.0	2.2	-1.2	2.2	2.2	0	3.6	1.7	+1.9	3.5	6.0	-2.5
Total		100		100	100	-	100	100	-	100	100	-
Turnout	54.4	56.3	-1.9	59.9	74.8	-14.9	61.1	58.4	+1.7	65.9	68.6	-2.7

1) For the 1995 and 1999 Bremen state election, the results for AFB (Arbeit fuer Bremen und Bremerhaven), a split-off from the SPD, have been added to the SPD results.



support for this type of ‘majoritarian government’ is not systematically argued. Rather, it carries a distinct *ad hoc* character in that it refers especially to the fact that in German elections coalition preferences of the parties were increasingly expected to be specified during campaigns and therefore could become an integral part of the voters decision-making strategies (Pulzer, 1982: 25–28). It is ironic then, that in exactly the year the just-mentioned article was published, the Schmidt government was overthrown through an FDP change in coalition preference not based on an election, and this event certainly does not square well with his concept of responsible coalition party government as outlined in 1978.

In concluding this section, it must be emphasized that in political science the general role of accountability for a legitimate and at the same time innovative democratic polity is far from clear. While little can be argued, at least in principle, against more accountability, the problem is that in real life it has a price, as Lijphart (1999) convincingly points out, because accountability as conceptualized in this chapter comes in a basket with other features of the executives parties dimension which jointly prevent (are negatively associated with) the ‘kinder, gentler, and more generous politics’ in consensus democracies (ibid.: 293). Still, if there is something speaking in favour of the accountability argument it should surface in a situation where a direct government turnover from one to a differently composed coalition government results from an election – as was the case on September 27, 1998, in Germany – and not from a party realigning its previous coalition preference as with the FDP in 1969 and in 1982.

### 3 On the Way to the September 27 General Election

In many studies of the (West) German political culture the government change of 1969 from a CDU/CSU–SPD coalition to a social democratic–liberal government is regarded – quite in line with Huntington’s (1991) thinking on democratic consolidation – as an important step in the firm establishment of the German post war democracy. Also the particular circumstances of the 1982 government turnover, which came about through the Liberals leaving the Schmidt government, gave some reason for concern at the time. What both turnovers have in common is that they did not come about as a direct consequence of the people’s electoral choice. This was different in 1998 when the change of government resulted from the votes the contending parties were able to attract: after all parties not jumping the 5 per cent clause hurdle were eliminated from the calculation of the parliamentary seats as the electoral law prescribes, the SPD scored 298 seats (+46 compared to 1994), the CDU/CSU 245 seats (–49), the FDP 44 seats (–3), the B 90/Greens 47 seats (–2) and the PDS 35 seats (+5). With this (small) majority of 345 seats (51.7 per cent) SPD and B 90/Greens were able to form a government, as they had indicated they would during the campaign. On 20 October 1998, both parties signed an elaborate coalition treaty with the demanding title ‘Departure and Renewal – Germany’s Way into the 21st Century (Aufbruch und Erneuerung – Deutschland’s Weg ins 21. Jahrhundert)’.

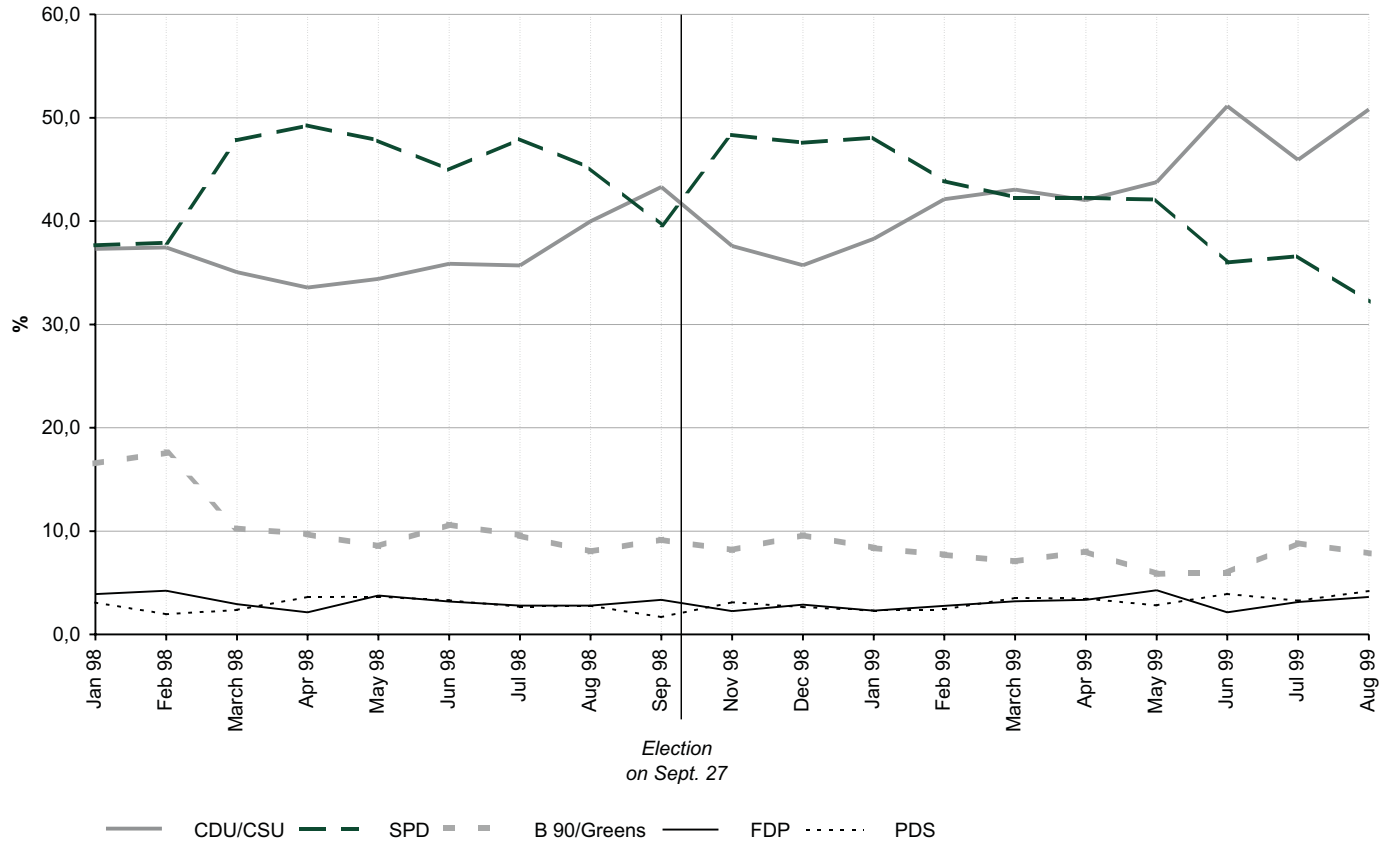


Figure 1 Ranking of Political Parties 1998–1999: First Rank (Percentages)

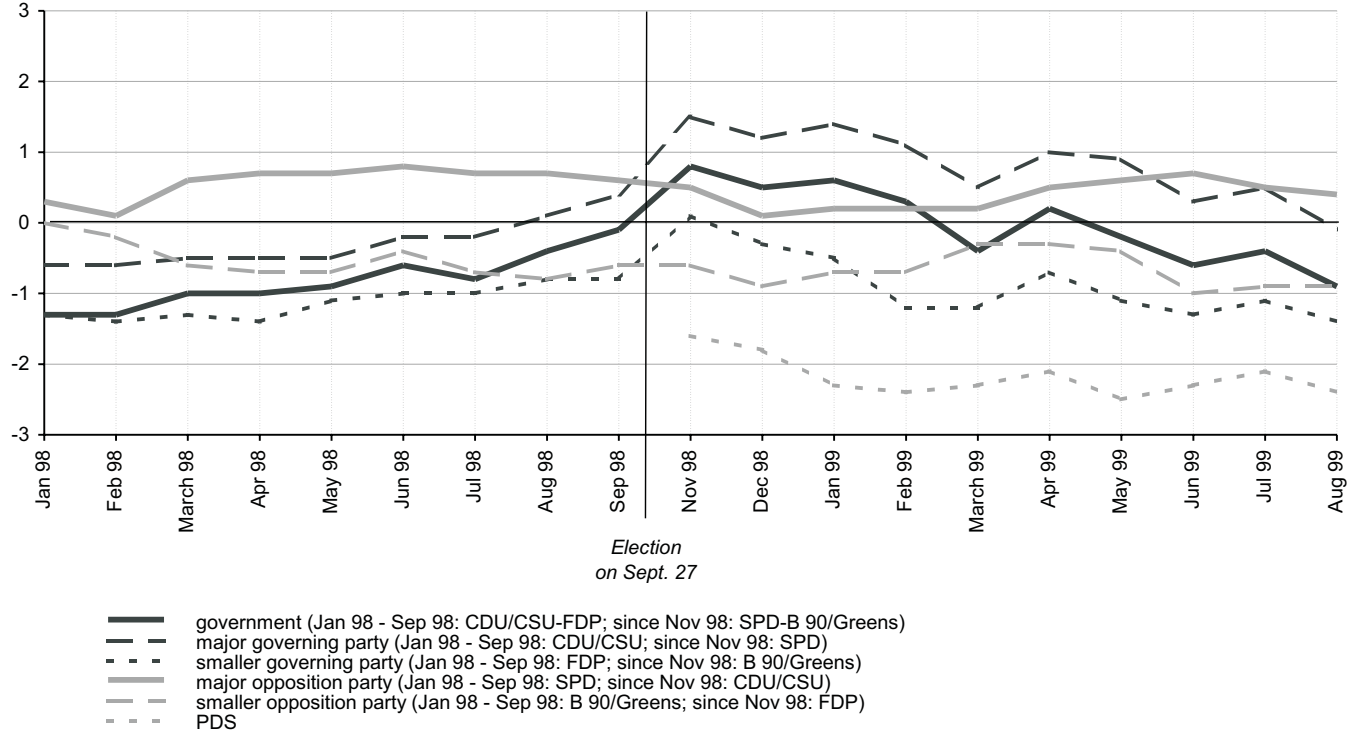


Figure 2 Public Evaluation of Federal Government, Governing Parties and Opposition Parties 1998–1999 (Means) on a +5/-5 Scale

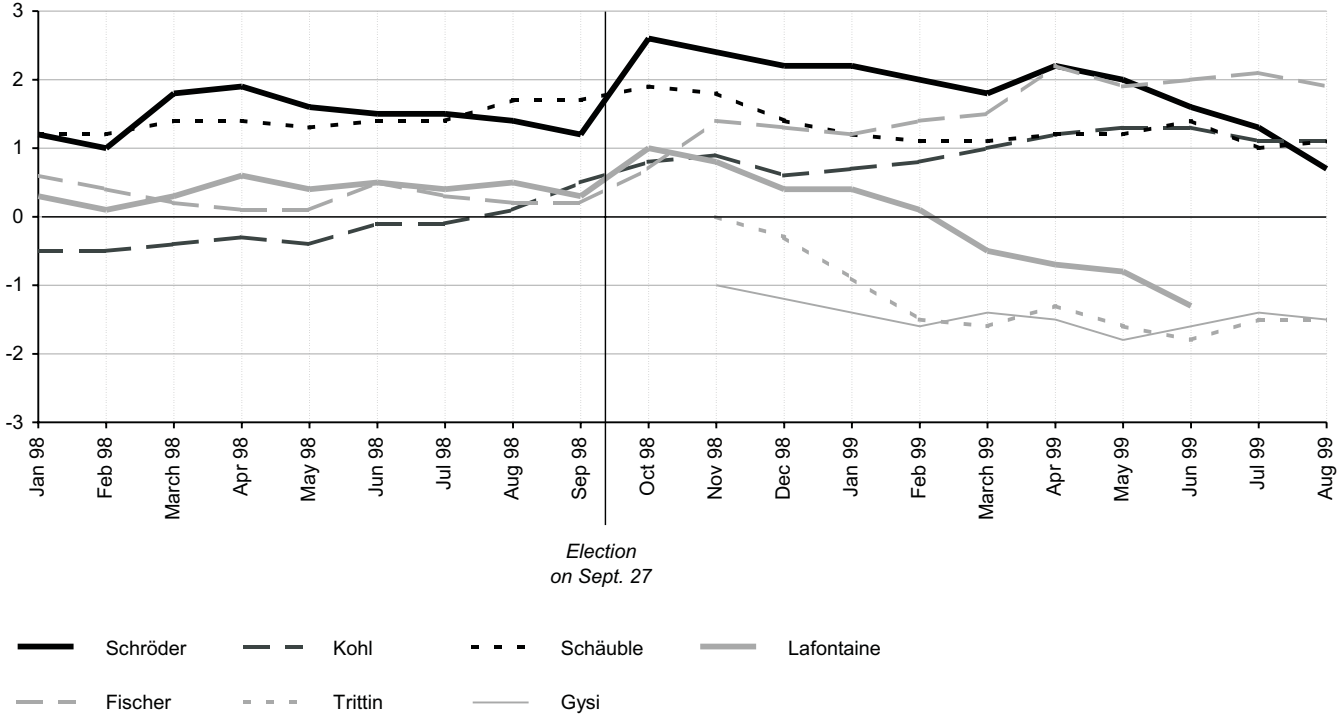


Figure 3 Public Evaluation of Leading German Politicians 1998–1999 (Means) on a +5/-5 Scale

**Table 2.** Satisfaction with Democracy in Germany 1998–1999 (percent)

Satisfaction with Democracy	2/1998						4/1998						6/1998										
	Voters of the						Voters of the						Voters of the										
	Total	CDU/		SPD		Greens	FDP	PDS	Total	CDU/		SPD		Greens	FDP	PDS	Total	CDU/		SPD		Greens	FDP
Satisfied	50	64	48	49	66	19	50	64	49	55	51	19	54	70	49	60	73	24					
Dissatisfied	47	34	50	48	34	81	47	33	47	39	45	81	42	26	48	37	26	70					
Don't know	3	2	2	3	–	–	3	3	3	6	4	–	4	4	3	3	1	6					
	<b>9/1998 (38th week)</b>						<b>10/1998</b>						<b>2/1999</b>										
Satisfied	57	69	58	64	59	13	62	63	73	55	51	36	61	62	66	68	82	27					
Dissatisfied	40	26	41	35	39	87	35	35	25	44	45	59	36	36	31	32	17	73					
Don't know	3	4	1	1	2	–	3	2	2	1	4	5	3	2	3	1	1	–					
	<b>4/1999</b>						<b>6/1999</b>						<b>9/1999</b>										
Satisfied	61	63	73	64	80	34	62	64	73	74	67	34	57	61	72	58	61	20					
Dissatisfied	35	33	25	32	20	66	36	34	26	25	32	63	40	36	27	38	31	77					
Don't know	4	4	2	4	–	–	2	2	1	1	1	3	3	3	1	4	8	3					

Question: What would you say in general about German democracy: Are you rather satisfied or rather dissatisfied?

Source: Monthly Politbarometer surveys conducted by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen for the Second German Television Network (ZDF)

Up to election day the outcome of the voting contest was open. This was a different situation from the general elections of 1990 and 1994 when the CDU–CSU had also lagged behind but had recovered during the election year (for 1994 see Weßels 1998). In 1998, after 16 years under a Kohl government, the pervasive feeling – and it was more a sentiment than a rational choice – that it was time for a change was spreading. When asked by the Mannheim-based Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (research group on elections) in their monthly surveys for the Second German Television Network (ZDF) up to the day of the election never less than two thirds of the citizens entitled to vote agreed with the statement that a change in government was due. This belief shows up in the data presented in figure 1 which displays the party rankings across the 1998/99 period. According to these data the CDU/CSU–FDP coalition at no point in time in 1998 could muster a majority of preferences over the SPD–B 90/Greens opposition parties. The degree of dissatisfaction with the Kohl government surfaces even more clearly when one considers the average ratings on a +5/-5 sympathy rating scale of the government and of the various parties as displayed in figure 2. There can be no question that the general mood of the public was tuned in favour of throwing the rascals out.

On the other hand, these figures also indicate that the government during the election year was capable of almost closing the gap to the opposition parties, a dynamic which is well-known not only for Germany, but also for other democracies. If this recovery is interpreted as ambivalence on the side of the voters, there is a lot of additional evidence to buffer this claim. Most telling is probably the finding from the Infratest-dimap election day exit poll that 16 per cent of the voters made up their mind on whom to vote for only on the day of the election and 10 per cent ‘during the last days’ (Rettich and Schatz, 1998: 6). Furthermore, according to the Infratest-dimap Wahlreport (Infratest-dimap 1998: 132–152), on average the SPD did not have a strong advantage over the CDU/CSU neither in the domain of political issues or with regard to the two candidates for chancellorship, although in those fields deemed most important by the voters – reduction of unemployment, tax reform, social justice, the environment – the SPD was clearly ahead of the CDU/CSU. The abovementioned voter ambivalence resulting from this situation also shows up in the Infratest-dimap finding that in the last two months before the election voters wavered between the belief that a SPD-led government would be better or not better equipped to successfully deal with the difficult agenda to be approached after the election. Thus, to summarize the situation up till election day, voters were caught between the two coalition government options available to them; in the end they decided in favour of innovation, of giving a new set of elites, kept for 16 years on the hard benches of the opposition, a chance to show that they were able to better cope with the tasks ahead for Germany than the existing government. It is in this sense that the vote was also a vote against Helmut Kohl even if it were wrong to attribute the lost election more or less exclusively to the man who had first promised not to run again in 1998 but who had then changed his mind and with this decision put his

**Table 3.** *Distribution of Votes in the Bundesrat after the General Election on September 27, 1998, and after the Berlin State Election in October, 1999*

Partisan Control of Länder Votes	Number of Bundesrat votes . . .	
	immediately after the general election	after the Berlin state election
Only CDU or CSU	10	17
CDU-FDP Coalition	6	11
CDU-SPD Coalition	11	11
SPD-FDP	4	4
SPD-B 90/Greens	18	13
SPD-PDS	3	3
Only SPD	17	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>69</b>
CDU/CSU controlled	16	28
Open	11	11
SPD controlled	42	30

predestined successor, Wolfgang Schäuble, into an awkward position indeed (for analyses of the 1998 election see Gabriel and Brettschneider, 1998; Jung and Roth, 1998; Rettich and Schatz, 1998; Feist and Hoffmann, 1999; Pappi, 1999).

#### 4 A New Government – What Has Changed?

Willy Brandt's inaugural speech as the chancellor of the SPD–FDP government in the autumn of 1969 is still remembered for a pervasive programmatic message: to dare more democracy (*mehr Demokratie wagen*). This saying reflected the spirit of the times very well, and it remained an overarching motto for the decade long after Brandt who because of a spy in the chancellery had resigned from office in 1974. While such an overarching motto could not be put forward by the new government, the SPD–B 90/Greens coalition treaty still defined a very demanding policy programme for the 1998–2002 legislative period: economic stability, social justice, ecological modernization, reliable foreign policy, inner security, strengthening of civil rights, and equality for women.

Analyses of the policy positions of the five parties represented in the new Bundestag (Klingemann, 1999: 125–127; König, 1999) indicate that in all major domains on the left–right dimension the SPD in its 1998 campaign has moved more than ever before to a middle of the road position; this validates the party's claim to seek the support of the 'new middle' (*neue Mitte*), a segment of voters which still has not been clearly defined in either socio-structural or in ideological and issue terms and is probably not even definable in this way. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that this 'new middle' seems to be a particularly volatile part of the electorate. In addition, if one considers the previously mentioned ambivalence of the voters with respect to the policy implications of an eventual government change, then expectations *vis-à-vis* the new coalition must have been running high, and – as

a look at figures 1 and 2 can verify – there initially was also a great deal of good will accompanying the operation of the Schröder government.

For detached observers of the scene, substantial ambiguities remained whether the coalition could really shoulder the basket of – partially contradictory – tasks it had assigned to itself in the 50–page coalition treaty. For one, there were structural tensions with the SPD membership regarding those supporting the pursuit of Schröder’s economic modernization concept and traditional social democrats, often located in the trade union camp, who were pushing their interpretation of social justice and who were not really willing to depart from the beloved German welfare state: redistribution of wealth through tax reform and reduction of unemployment through state interventionist measures. The latter concept was epitomized by the new minister of finance Oskar Lafontaine and a group of handpicked economic advisors who wanted to follow Keynesian demand economy concepts and to control international money markets. Furthermore, problems quickly surfaced with the B 90/Greens coalition with attempts to push through new immigration and citizenship legislation against the preferences of not only CDU/CSU but also of most of the SPD supporters and with Jürgen Trittin, minister for environmental affairs, who managed in no time to antagonize not only nationally, but also internationally, almost everyone he had to deal with in getting through with his environmental reform plans, especially the withdrawal of the use of nuclear energy in Germany.

In retrospect, it is difficult to understand that in 16 years of opposition both parties had not been able to design a reform program in sufficiently operational detail to be implemented quickly and successfully after the new government had been put in place and all relevant personnel decisions had been taken. But, in short, by early 1999 the first signs of voter disappointment were already beginning to surface, and with the loss of the Hesse state election in February 1999, with a surprising win for CDU and FDP, a truly spectacular decline in partisan support both for the SPD and B 90/Greens started, and this despite the fact that inside and outside of Germany there was widespread agreement that the new government had handled Germany’s role in the Kosovo conflict extremely well. This decline which can be directly tied to failures in policy areas claimed as being absolutely essential for the new government – citizenship law, nuclear energy, labour market, pensions and health system reform, and economic modernization – and not so much to matters of political style as the SPD argued – by October 1999 culminated in the loss of five more state elections, three in the East one in the West – the Saarland – and in Berlin (see table 1), not to speak of the negative outcome of the September community elections in Northrhine-Westphalia, the largest German Land.

It is remarkable that chancellor Schröder for a while seemed not to be pulled down in public ratings by the loss of support for this government; however, by May 1999 his reputation had also started to substantially decline, and quite unexpectedly in the autumn of 1999 it was the B 90/Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer who was regarded as the most sympathetic German politician. The downfall of Lafontaine



in the ratings and then his disappearance from the list of rated politicians reflect his decision in the spring of 1999 to resign both from his ministerial post and from his position as party leader, a decision which has left deep marks internally and externally with the SPD (for the ratings of the various politicians see figure 3).

With this brief account of what happened politically in Germany in year one after the government change, the question can now be addressed whether this has had an effect on the legitimacy beliefs of the electorate. The answer is sought from responses to a question on satisfaction with democracy the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen asks about every second month in their ZDF surveys, a question which has also been used recently in an analysis of the effects of the perceived economic performance of the German government on democratic satisfaction (Cusack, 1999).

There are three observations in the table that deserve special mention. The first is that the almost even balance of satisfaction and dissatisfaction at the beginning of 1998 changed noticeably during the campaign in the direction of the satisfaction category. This can be interpreted as a corollary of voter mobilization and reiterates observations from previous elections that campaigns – disliked as they are – nevertheless make citizens rally behind the democratic flag. The higher satisfaction level reached in October 1998 by the time the new government took office stayed almost unchanged until mid 1999, and only since then it appears that government dissatisfaction (see figure 2) is slowly having an impact also on democratic satisfaction. The government change thus obviously has had a positive effect on the appreciation of democracy by the German public which the reduced accountability notion discussed in this chapter would lead one to expect. On the other hand, the signs of decline, if this development of public opinion continues, point to the fact that the beneficial impact of government change quite easily evaporates if peoples' expectations associated with such a change are not fulfilled. In this sense, a government–opposition exchange is but one – and clearly a fragile – mechanism of sustaining democratic system support.

The second point to be made is that indeed adherents of opposition parties have some problems with democratic satisfaction, and it is here where the positive impact of an election campaign is most visible. In this context, it is particularly worthwhile mentioning that PDS voters are the only ones who consistently and at a high level – only slightly and very briefly reduced immediately after the election – display a critical stance toward German democracy. Since the PDS has no strength to speak of in the 'old' Länder, this finding mostly reflects the partial, but lingering schism between a particular group of former GDR citizens and the rest of the citizenry in their visions of a desirable polity (this point is very succinctly made by the East German writer Monika Maron (1999)).

Third, and interestingly enough, the loss of power for the CDU/CSU and FDP as of now (autumn 1999) has not left the kind of mark on their supporters one would have expected in terms of democratic satisfaction: both voter groups continue to be as satisfied, or even more so, with German democracy as the average electorate.

It almost looks like these voters have accepted the idea of government change as an important ingredient of the democratic process; if this interpretation is correct, then this can reinforce the belief that Germany has become a consolidated democracy.

Finally, for fairness' sake, it must at least be mentioned that some water in this good wine exists in the fact that in most of the state elections and also in the European election a rather substantial decline in turnout took place.

### 5 A New Democracy?

After the electoral victory of SPD and B 90/Greens, voices could be heard in the German public that this would lead away from the liberal-democratic traditions which had slowly grown in (West) Germany since 1949 and which had given Germany its national as well as international political identity. While such interpretations at least in part reflected explicit policy stances by the SPD and the B 90/Greens, as laid down in their coalition treaty, these concerns were based even more on the fact that the new government could, at least in principle, rely on a partisan distribution of votes in the Bundesrat that gave the federal government a more or less free hand in legislating. Table 3 represents the distribution of votes in the Bundesrat after the general election on 27 September 1998 and after the Berlin state election of 10 October, 1999.

While the SPD-controlled Länder initially were close to the constitutionally relevant two-thirds majority of 46 votes, the new situation is almost one of impasse. This distribution of Bundesrat seats implies that practically no essential legislation can be pushed through by the federal government without some reconciliation with the policy preferences of the CDU/CSU (not considering the fact that the Länder may well align on certain issues along the dimension of Länder and not of partisan interests and that the federal government may tailor some legislation such that no Bundesrat approval is necessary). In sum, whatever hopes or fears existed after the general election about a major change in the political outlook of the Federal Republic, after the state elections of 1999 they can no longer be substantiated. In addition, the two state elections in 2000 in Schleswig-Holstein and Northrhine-Westphalia have not improved the voting situation for the federal government in the Bundesrat, since both Länder continue to be governed by a SPD–B 90/Green coalition.

It is clear, then, that in structural terms Peter Pulzer's argument against German federalism as a major factor impinging on the notion of responsible party government remains in force, as does the argument that this particular institutional melange is not conducive for easy government accountability *vis-à-vis* the voters. Thus, the implication of cooperative federalism remains a matter for debate, and one can only agree with Anderson (1995b: 351) when he argues that 'while the scholarly literature on the dynamics of government popularity in Western democracies is extensive, it has seldom directly addressed questions of institutional design and the role institutions play in the assignment of credit and blame'. And the problem of diffuse accountability is further aggravated by the penetration of a broad

variety of social interests into the governmental decision-making processes which motivated Peter Katzenstein (1987) to speak of Germany as a semi-sovereign state and which has been frequently criticized by Peter Pulzer in his reflections on responsible party government (the most recent example of German consensus politics is the pact for employment – Bündnis für Arbeit – which is a revival of the late sixties concerted action and reflects a corporatist understanding of politics without considering that only the government is legitimated by the citizenry).

Regarding coalitions and responsible party government, one can at least for practical purposes side with Peter Pulzer when he argues that German political practice has made coalitions acceptable because voters are clearly informed ahead of time – at least in general elections – which parties would form a government if they obtained the necessary electoral support. The government change of 1998 has testified to the ability of the German electorate to bring such a change about even under conditions of proportional representation. However, in accountability terms this is a situation quite a distance away from one where voters can punish or reward a governing party directly and under a situation of utmost transparency.

One final consideration therefore addresses again the logic of the government–opposition mechanism in democracies; they are ‘a form of government that involves the voters in making decisions on matters of importance to people. Being able to make decisions requires that the people be presented with a choice between viable and real alternatives’ (Mc Donald, Budge, and Hofferbert, 1999: 21). There can be no question that the functioning of this mechanism is an important factor in providing reward and blame and thereby creativity, innovation, and control for a polity. However, the recent German example discussed in this chapter speaks to the fact that the impetus from throwing the rascals out can evaporate fairly quickly if the former opposition has not done its homework on formulating alternate policy options properly. Furthermore, government change is an instrument that by the logic of the democratic electoral process can unfold its potential only infrequently and at long intervals. It is not by chance, therefore, that in European politics the mass media and extraparliamentary groups have made so much headway in influencing political decision making. This is another field where institutional engineering is called for. But this thought leads necessarily on also to the pressures from globalization, transnational institution building, and regionalization which all contribute to a situation where national political systems are challenged on their legitimacy and effectiveness in a very basic way. Under such circumstances, the problems of accountability have to be reconceptualized very differently from the way this could be done in this essay.

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