

**Kirchheimer Revisited:  
Party Polarization, Party Convergence, or Party Decline  
in the 2005 German Elections?**

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## **Introduction**

Otto Kirchheimer published two article length chapters in 1966, the year that Germany's first grand coalition government assumed power. In these chapters, Kirchheimer contended that mass cleavage parties had given way to catch-all parties and he predicted that this new party type would reek havoc on the political party system as a vessel of viable governmental opposition. He believed that as political parties cease to be competing as principled ideologues, instead becoming competitive instrumentalists, the quality and quantity of opposition or dissent would decline in government. This paper evaluates that claim as it is applied to the German case. Given the formation of Germany's second grand coalition government in November of 2005, it seems most appropriate to revisit Kirchheimer's prediction at the onset of Germany's first coalition government. In order to do so, the Kirchheimer thesis of decline of ideology will first be evaluated against the backdrop of West European party systems generally. Then several propositions from the Kirchheimer thesis will be applied specifically in the German case for evaluation. In the end, the author speculates about the relevance of the Kirchheimer thesis in explaining the 2005 German elections.

## **The Kirchheimer Thesis**

The Kirchheimer thesis that provides the launching point for this investigation regards the *vanishing opposition* or the angst that the meaningful role of political parties as interest aggregators and articulators is declining. Otto Kirchheimer coined the term "catch-all party" to refer to change that he saw evident in the political party systems across Western Europe following the Second World War (Kirchheimer 1966a, 184). While some scholars debate the clarity and specificity of the catch-all party classification

(Wolinetz 2002, 146; Dittrich 1983; Smith 1989), several key ideas emerge to characterize this distinction. These ideas can be classified as conditions and implications of the catch-all party.

Conditions which produce the catch-all party revolve around advanced industrialism and democratic consolidation. In sum, the catch-all party emerges in advanced industrial democracies where traditional cleavages such as class and religion have been largely overcome by the unity of purpose pervasive in stable systems. Kirchheimer suggests that advanced industrial society exhibited a welfare state consensus and foreign policy consensus regarding the common circumstance of the armament and defensive needs of large and mid-sized powers (Kirchheimer 1966b, 247). In other words, a certain level of economic development mediates the debate between radical reformers (Marxists) and economic liberals because the economic regime type is not in question and revolution is not an option; the debate revolves around fine-tuning policy rather than what kind of system is the proper one. Kirchheimer also suggests that catch-all parties require more sophisticated democratic citizens. This is because catch-all parties have a more volatile (less loyal) constituent base (1966a, 195), more indefinite policy stances (1966a, 197), and present a message that, though carefully crafted, aims to combine as many disparate propositions as possible so long as they do not come into direct conflict or contradiction (1966a, 186). All of this taken together means that catch-all parties can be confusing as they make it incumbent upon the individual voter to gather information, sort out the complexities, resolve internal inconsistencies in the party platform, envision policy solutions and prioritize issues. Thus Kirchheimer contends that a most sophisticated democratic citizen is required in order for catch-all parties to serve

the purpose of meaningful interest aggregation and articulation in the polity (1966a, 199). He worries that such sophistication is utopian (1966a, 199) and he refers to the catch-all party as a “sensitive instrument (1966a, 200) vulnerable to the mood and whim of the voter.

The implications for the political party system provide a focal point for his analysis and prognostication. Kirchheimer fears that the rise of catch-all parties will distort, if not destroy and render meaningless, the political party system. Since the time of the French Revolution, the political party system has traditionally revolved around political parties distinguishing themselves as they take ideologically distinct positions along a left-right continuum. Kirchheimer argues that in terms of behavior, catch-all parties adjust their position instrumentally, based on the position of other parties and of the median voter, rather than intentionally, driven by ideological conviction, principle, or programmatic vision (1966a, 188). They are consumed by the goal of attracting increasing vote share and thus make their appeals at the center of politics (1966a, 189, 192, 199), always concerned with minimizing the number of potential constituents that they marginalize. Catch-all parties diminish the meaningful opposition in political systems, Kirchheimer argues. They produce a climate of consensus where the goal of political parties is amassing ever larger numbers of votes, rather than a climate of fundamental dispute and challenge where the goal of parties includes not just election returns but advocating a position and raising controversial issues.

### **Research Design**

In order to evaluate the validity of the Kirchheimer thesis regarding the decline of political party opposition, it becomes necessary to operationalize some of his concepts.

For the purpose of this analysis, several core elements of his theory will be extracted and evaluated. If Kirchheimer is correct in his prediction, one might hypothesize that party positions are converging or centering, rather than polarizing ideologically. This may mean that parties are becoming increasingly undifferentiated, instrumental, and less ideological in their orientation. If Kirchheimer is incorrect, then parties can be expected to be polarizing in terms of their positions and clearly differentiable ideologically.

To operationalize Kirchheimer's prediction, several propositions may be derived. First, parties **adjust their positions deliberately**, and taking account of the strategic position of other parties. Thus one would expect to see parties moving in tandem and in similar directions rather than divergently. Second, parties stay **close to the ideological center** of politics and to the median voter. Therefore, catch-all parties should not be taking ideologically extreme positions but would have more moderate platforms. Third, **partisanship** and the commitment to political parties on the part of the electorate should be declining. This may be immediately evident in terms of **party membership**. However, other subtle indicators may include the **electoral gains and losses for parties** in successive elections, where high numbers of votes being transferred from party to party reflects a low level of partisanship and party loyalty or discipline on the part of voters.

This paper will evaluate each proposition in the context of German elections beginning in 1949 to investigate the Kirchheimer thesis as applied to the German case. The goal is to evaluate the pattern over time and to make comments about the development of the contemporary German party system and the viability of opposition in Germany. A central question motivating this project is whether the German grand

coalition produced as a result of the 2005 German elections represents dramatic party convergence that is consistent with the Kirchheimer thesis. The other German grand coalition, from 1966-1969 will be considered in terms of the conditions that produced it and the implications that it had for the party system. Before moving to the German case, the general trend regarding party systems and ideology will be evaluate across Western Europe.

### **Political Party Crisis in Western Europe?**

The ideas of a crisis of party, the decline of parties, and party failure have been widely discussed in the literature on European political parties over the last two decades (Mair 1984; Poguntke 1996). Feelings among voters of an alienation from parties is one possible explanation. Mistrust in parties develops when political leaders begin to be perceived as self-serving and disconnected from the interests of constituents (Katz and Mair 2002, 134). Suzanne Berger suggests that across Western Europe, political parties failed to adapt to the changes taking place and increasing demands emerging from the ideological fringes, such as the Greens and also the far right of the political spectrum (Berger 1979). Hans Daalder suggests that an increasing frustration with political parties pervades the West European landscape today (Daalder 1992).

Statistically, many scholars have been able to make the case for a crisis among political parties. Declining voter turnout has been taken as an indicator of party decline (Mair 1984). Party membership statistics have been slipping according to many accounts, also suggesting a disenchantment with and decline of political parties (Katz and Mair 1992). Additionally, statistics on party shifting or votes for populist parties have

been used to suggest a frustration among voter with mainstream parties (Betz 1994; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Kitschelt 1995).

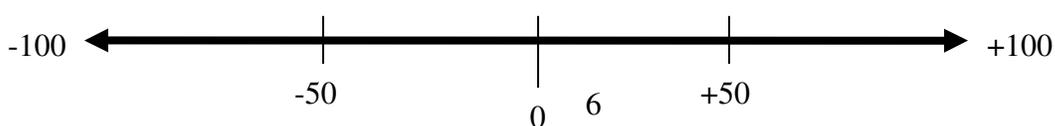
However, even with the suggested crisis of parties, election returns still suggest that that mainstream parties have been able to hold on to their power base. In other words, despite the substantiated lack of attentiveness to citizen demands and the increasing alienation of voters from parties, the same parties continued to be re-elected into office. Additionally, even as European politics has arguably moved toward consensus at the center with an apparent absence of viable opposition (Bale 2003; Bell and Criddle 2004; Lipset 2004), mainstream parties continue to dominate the political landscape. Although some suggest democracy is doing just fine despite the vacuum in accountability and representation on the party of political parties (Blondel 2002).

### **Have West European Parties Been Responsible Parties?**

Using Manifesto Data from the Manifesto Research Group (Budge et al. 2001), the relationship between the ideological position of voters and the ideological position of parties will be evaluated. Three variables are considered for fifteen European countries: Median Voter Ideological score (MVI), Mainstream Left party Ideological score (MSLI) and Mainstream Right party Ideological score. The dataset is arranged as a time series analysis, with the ideological score measured for each election between 1945 and 1998. First I will discuss the variables individually, and then the relationship between variables will be tested below.

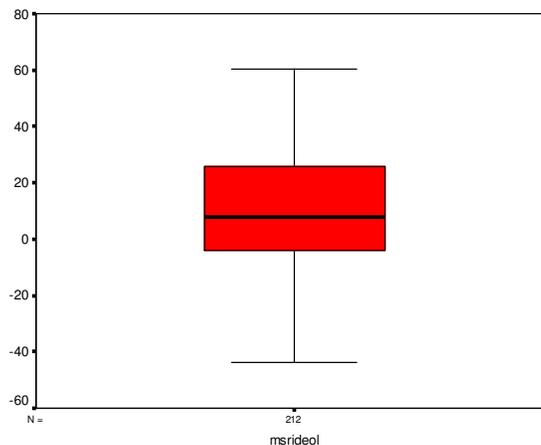
Ideology score are calculated for each variable on a scale of -100 to +100 where 0 is a centrist midpoint.

**Figure 1. Ideology Scores of variables**



Frequencies for the MVI variable reveal that voters have tended to be slightly to the left of center while the variable follows a fairly normal distribution around the mean of -4.6. The MSLI variable also follows a normal distribution, although it is positively skewed to the right with a mean of -17.0. The MSRI variable, however, appears to be bimodal, therefore the best central tendency measure is the median at +7.8. Such a bimodal distribution calls for speculation to explain why the mainstream right ideology appears to be fractionalized. One plausible explanation appears to be that the mainstream right has both a moderate right in some countries, and a more far right position in others. It might also be that the mainstream right vote varies within countries, with the MSR parties adjusting themselves more widely across the spectrum on the right of center while MSL parties have held more of a constant position ideologically over time. A look at the box plot for this variable in Figure 2 reveals where the more volatile end of the MSR appears.

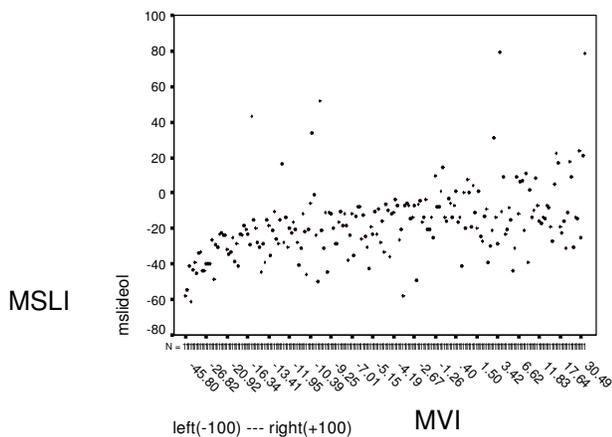
**Figure 2. Box Plot of Mainstream Right Ideology (MSRI)**



This box plot shows the median of 7.8 dividing two halves of the box representing the middle 50 percent of all cases. The top half of the box is visibly larger than the bottom half, indicating that the cases in the interquartile range whose values are greater than 7.8 are more widely dispersed. This suggests that the MSR closer to the ideological center at mode one of the bimodal distribution tends to be more uniform in its ideological position. The MSR at mode 2 has a wider range of ideological beliefs, some of which tend toward a quite conservative right wing position. In sum, there appear to be two distinct types of MSR party. One type tends toward the center of politics and is ideologically united. The other MSR party type is more widely dispersed ideologically varying or perhaps shifting over time from more moderate to more extreme right-wing positions.

The relationship between both MSL and MSR parties with the MVI score over time across several elections reveals whether or not the argument can be made that mainstream parties may be consolidating power across Europe because they are responsive to citizen demands. The relationship between mainstream parties and voters was initially examined using scatterplots of the relationships. In the scatterplot below for ideological positions of the MSL parties and voters, a positive linear relationship appears.

**Figure 3. Regression 1 MSL Parties Adapt to Voters**



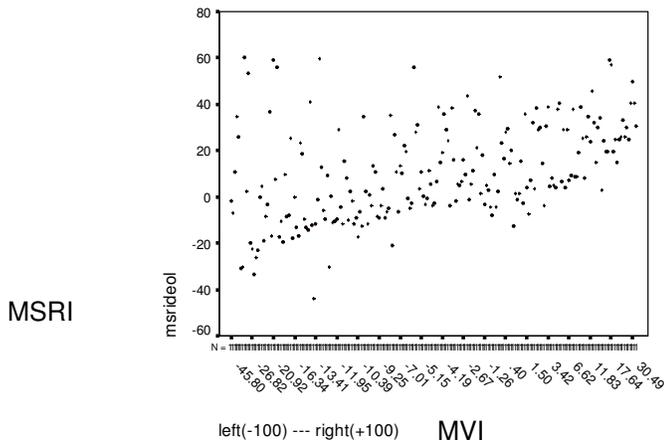
In order to evaluate this relationship, a bivariate regression model was run. The first of two regression equations was set up with MSL party position as the dependent variable and MVI score, or the position of the median voter representing the aggregate ideological position of voters for any given election, serving as the independent variable. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Regression Results for Model 1: MSL Parties Adapt to Voters**

		S.E.	Significance
Constant	-13.633 (b)	1.248	.000
MVI	.734 (b)	.086	.000
R / Correlation	.506		.000
R Square	.253	17.25	.000
Valid N= 212			

A strong correlation exists between the two variables at .506. When placed in a causal relationship through the regression equation, the results suggest that 25 percent of the variance in the positioning of MSL parties can be explained by the ideological positions taken by the voters.

**Figure 4. Regression 2 MSR Parties Adapt to Voters**



To evaluate the relationship between ideological positions of the MSR parties and voters, a scatterplot provides visualization. As seen above, another positive linear relationship appears, however, the dispersion around the regression line is greater suggesting more variation on the mainstream right (Figure 4).

The second of the two regression equations was set up with MSL party position as the dependent variable and MVI score as the independent variable in order to evaluate this relationship. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Regression Results for Model 2: MSR Parties Adapt to Voters**

		<b>S.E.</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Constant	-13.538 (b)	1.352	.000
MVI	.640 (b)	.093	.000
R / Correlation	.428		.000
R Square	.183	18.68	.000
Valid N= 212			

The relationship between these two variables is weaker than that found in the previous regression. Less than one-fifth of the variation in MSR party positioning can be accounted for by shifting voter preferences. This suggests that the MSR parties are not as directly responsive to voter preferences as the MSL parties appear to be. However, the bimodal distribution of the MSR parties may play a role in explaining this weaker relationship. Future analysis should investigate whether the more centrist MSR parties adjust to voters more than the more conservative MSR parties do. Such explanations would follow the logic of median voter theorists, such as William Riker and Anthony Downs who suggest that parties closer to the ideological center position themselves in an attempt to capture mass appeal (Downs 1957; Riker 1962). Also, borrowing from Otto Kirchheimer's catch-all party ideas, the argument can be made that parties taking more

distinct ideological positions farther away from the political center of politics run the risk of alienating voters with their stronger convictions while more centrist, “catch-all” parties try to avoid clear issue positions in order to achieve wider appeal (Kirchheimer 1966a; Krouwel 2003, 27).

### **Analysis of German Party Behavior**

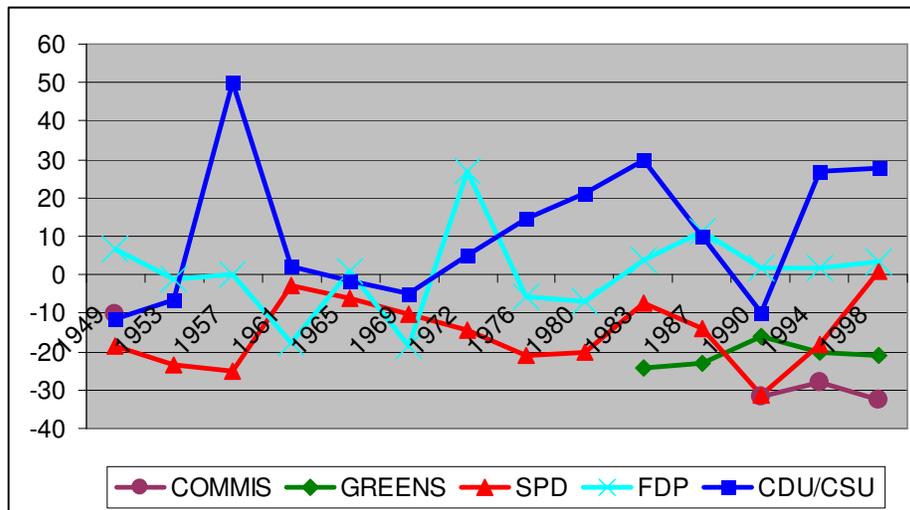
In an attempt to evaluate the applicability of the Kirchheimer thesis to the German case, the three propositions derived from the thesis in the research design section above will be assessed for the German case. Using just the data coded for Germany from the Manifesto Research Group (Budge et al. 2001), ideological positions of parties and the median voter will be employed in this analysis to get a sense of the pattern in the German political party system over time.

#### **Do parties adjust their position according to other parties?**

One of the chief complaints that Kirchheimer had is that catch-all parties lose their ideological significance as they pattern their behavior after each other in competing for the most votes rather than in taking clear, ideologically-distinct, and principled positions in opposition to one another. In this section, data will be evaluated on the German party positions using ideology scores for the parties. To the extent that parties seem to adjust in response to the positions of other parties, Kirchheimer’s proposition will seem to be supported. If parties do not mirror the each other’s strategic moves reflecting a similar pattern of simultaneous swings to the right and left but remain more true to their separate ideological positions as indicated by differing patterns of movement, then Kirchheimer’s thesis may be questioned in terms of applicability in the German case.

To assess patterns, the nature of the relationship between parties can be ascertained by plotting the ideological position of parties over time, using the -100 to +100 ideological scores described above. In doing so, the following trends emerge. First, there are two periods of divergence and two periods of convergence in party positions that become obvious. The parties diverge from 1949-1957 and again from 1972-1980. The parties converge from 1961-1969 and again from 1983-1998.

**Figure 5. Ideological Patterns in the German Party System**



The most dramatic divergence in ideology scores between the two major parties comes in the 1957 election. In the previous election in 1953, the Adenauer government had a mandate of two-thirds of the population through its governing coalition with most minor parties excepting the SPD. The CDU/CSU government demonstrated its belief that it had a substantial popular mandate, as it moved to a dramatically more conservative position prior to the 1957 election, as the wide divergence in ideology scores reflects. The SPD responded by moving slightly farther to the left, while the small coalition partners pulled away from the CDU/CSU as they moved farther to the right. In fact, the party system was consolidated through this election, with most of the small parties disappearing

between 1953 and 1957 leaving only the CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, and DP getting seats in 1957, whereas eight parties had held seats in 1953. All five parties except the FDP gained vote share in 1957, suggesting that carving out more precise ideological ground farther to the left and right served to increase their support and drive out many smaller parties. The SPD picked up 18 seats as a result of holding their ground and moving slightly farther to the left as the CDU/CSU swung to the right.

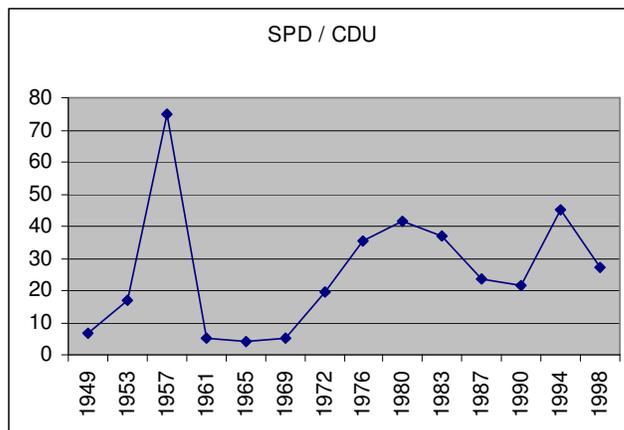
Where the first divergence period came under CDU governments, the second divergence came under SPD governments. Additionally, by the second divergence period from 1972 to 1980, the FDP had become integral as a coalition partner. The FDP has served in the German coalition government every year from 1949 to 2005, except from 1957-1960 and 1998-2006. The FDP originally aligned itself in coalition government with the CDU from 1949 through 1968, except 1957-1960. Then it moved to become a coalition partner with the SPD from 1969 to 1982 before returning to coalition with the CDU in 1983-1997. Through the period of the second divergence, both the CDU/CSU and SPD vote share hovered at around forty-five percent. It was the FDP that made the difference giving the SPD the advantage. Most interesting is the fact that the FDP platform was far more conservative than that of the CDU/CSU in 1972, yet the SPD and FDP governed together in coalition, rather than the more likely seeming ideological alliance between the CDU/CSU and FDP. This could suggest that the 1972 coalition was formed based less on ideology than other matters, or that the politics of government formation is a completely separate matter from partisan ideological alliances. On the other hand, it might also indicate that the particular issues forming the basis of the 1972

FDP position were rightist, though on a different issue dimension than those placing the 1972 CDU/CSU on the right side of the spectrum.

Overall, the pattern of party ideological positioning suggests inconclusive evidence for the Kirchheimer proposition. On the one hand, there are two instances of convergence suggesting Kirchheimer is correct and two periods of divergence suggesting party independence of one another. In total years, parties diverge for sixteen years and converge for twenty-three years. The time spent in convergence outnumbers the time spent in divergence by 8 years or thirty-three percent more time. This seems to give some additional advantage to the convergence thesis as a substantial proportion of additional time is spent in convergence.

In addition to following a similar trajectory, the degree of ideological difference also seems relevant to understanding whether parties are making an effort to distinguish themselves from one another. In other words, even if they both move to the left at the same time, how far apart are their positions ideologically? To evaluate the role of ideological difference as a further refinement of the idea of party convergence, the range was calculated between parties.

**Figure 6. Ideological Range Between CDU / SPD**



Omitting the 1957 distance, which appears to be extreme, the ideological distance between the two mainstream parties is relatively minor from 1949 to 1976. In fact, the average distance between the two parties is approximately twenty-six units as the descriptive statistics reveal.

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SPD	14	-31.18	.87	-15.0848	9.11812
CDU	14	-11.56	50.00	10.9294	18.21836
Valid N (listwise)	14				

This suggests that above average levels of ideological divergence do not begin to occur until 1976, with the one exception of 1957. The ideological difference remains above average from 1976 to 1998 with only two exceptions, 1987 and 1990. Therefore, a general trend can be derived to suggest that the 1949 to 1976 period was one of less ideological intensity in terms of extremes of contestation, whereas from 1976 to 1998 ideological differences were more dramatic and important.

In terms of evaluating Kirchheimer, this suggests that both direction and magnitude of the ideological pattern must be assessed in order to properly understand whether parties seem to be adjusting their positions in accordance with those of other parties. The overall pattern favors the Kirchheimer thesis, with more time spent in convergence than in divergence. However, much of the time period spent in convergence in overall pattern is also spent in above average levels of ideological distance. So although parties moved left and right at the same times after 1983, three times out of five they did so at above average levels of ideological distinction or difference. This may indicate that parties can both follow each others cues and maintain ideological distinctiveness, an apparent challenge to Kirchheimer's formulation.

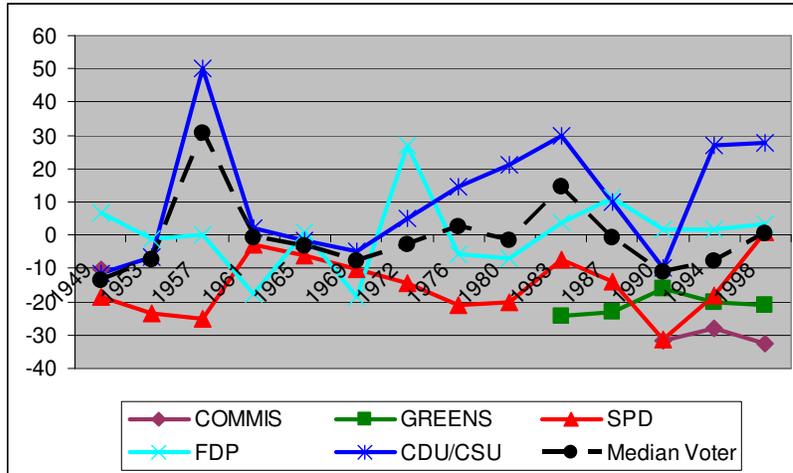
### **Are parties closer to the ideological center or are they responsible parties?**

The idea of “responsible parties” in the literature on American political parties emphasizes that the responsible political party reflects and represents the demands of its constituents (*APSR* 1950). Therefore, viable political parties ought to be responding to and adapting with voter concerns. Yet, it seems parties must walk a fine line between maintaining their ideological integrity and differentiability, while responding and reacting to constituents. In particular, Kirchheimer criticized the responsible party where it blindly follows the whim of the median voter. The instrumentalist catch-all party characterized by Kirchheimer is a responsible party, which adjusts its position not only in tandem with other political parties but also with the median voter. As explained above, Kirchheimer argued that catch-all parties have the primary goal of attracting increasing numbers of voters. This makes the median voter the primary target for catch-all parties. Therefore, one can expect the median voter position and the catch-all party position to follow a similar pattern of adjustment over time and also that the two positions should be ideologically similar. A truly responsible party, according to Kirchheimer, reflects the position of its core constituents, which is not the same as the median voter; parties ought to clearly differentiate themselves and take positions that are ideologically distinct, he argues. For him, the median voter position is a cop-out, and truly responsible parties court partisans that have defined demands so such parties seek to find their unique position as they foster distinctions between themselves and other parties.

To evaluate whether responsible catch-all parties have been the norm in the German case, the relationship between the median voter and the main parties was plotted.

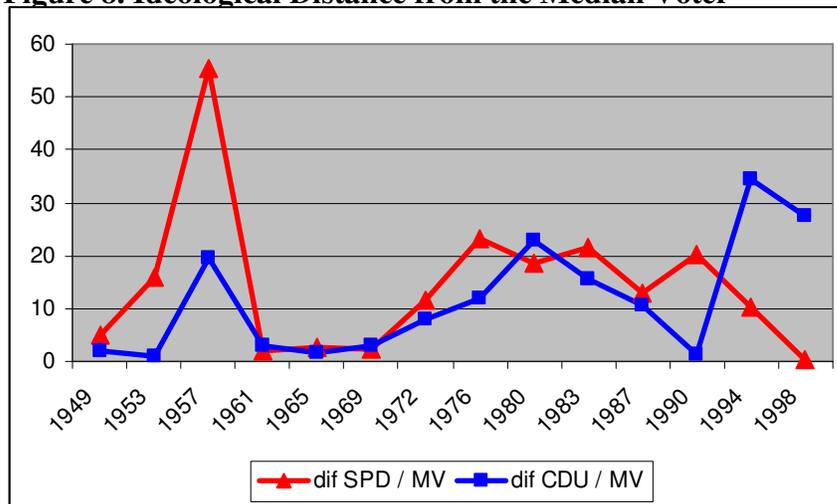
The pattern shows that one catch-all party has stayed closer to the pattern of the median voter in the German cases, moving to the right or to the left as the median voter does.

**Figure 7. Ideological Patterns of Parties Compared with the Median Voter**



The CDU/CSU follows the pattern of the median voter, remaining close to its position throughout this period with one exception in 1980. Yet in 1980 the median voter moves to the left, while apparently the cue is missed by both catch-all parties as neither the CDU/CSU nor the SPD adjusts their position to the left in that year. Unlike the CDU/CSU, the SPD has several periods with patterns of clear divergence and ideological distance from the median voter.

**Figure 8. Ideological Distance from the Median Voter**



As Figure 8 shows more clearly, the SPD always has a higher magnitude of ideological difference from the median voter than does the CDU/CSU except at three points in time: 1980, 1994 and 1998. The year 1980 has already been highlighted as the single election year where the CDU/CSU deviates away from the median voter pattern of moving to take more rightist or leftist positions, so further evaluation of this election may reveal key explanations. It does not appear to be the case that these three elections where the CDU/CSU displays greater ideological distance from the median voter than does the SPD can be explained by CDU/CSU status as opposition or party of government as two years it is opposition and one year it governs (1994). Therefore, the CDU/CSU does not move itself farther away from the median voter and consistently win with this strategy, as it only does so in 1994.

**Table 3. Coalition Governments 1949-1998**

	<b>Coalition Government</b>
<b>1949</b>	CDU FDP DP
<b>1953</b>	CDU plus most minor parties
<b>1957</b>	CDU DP (German party)
<b>1961</b>	CDU FDP
<b>1965</b>	CDU FDP
<b>1969</b>	SPD FDP
<b>1972</b>	SPD FDP
<b>1976</b>	SPD FDP
<b>1980</b>	SPD FDP
<b>1983</b>	CDU FDP
<b>1987</b>	CDU FDP
<b>1990</b>	CDU FDP
<b>1994</b>	CDU FDP
<b>1998</b>	SPD Greens

If the strategy had proved a winning one, then perhaps it could be accounted for on those grounds. Perhaps the lesson is that a moderate move away from the median voter in 1980 followed by moving toward the median voter brought the CDU/CSU back into governing power in the subsequent election of 1983. Meanwhile, a dramatic move away from the median voter for the CDU/CSU in 1994 with sustained high levels of distance in 1998

caused it to lose its position in the governing coalition in the subsequent election of 1998 and it remained out of power in the 2002 elections. This suggests that the magnitude of distance as well as the duration of the ideological distance from the median voter appears to affect the fortunes of the CDU/CSU. On the other hand, the SPD governed from 1969-1980 and then again in 1998, spending most of its time in power more distant from the position of the median voter than was the catch-all party in opposition at the time, the CDU/CSU. Forty percent of the time that the SPD has governed, it has been more distant from the position of the median voter than (two out of five times). The CDU/CSU has governed while being more distant from the position of the median voter only twenty-five percent of the time (two out of eight times). Thus the SPD appears more able to deviate from the position of the median voter and still win office to govern than the CDU/CSU.

A regression analysis confirms that overall the median voter position determines the CDU/CSU position much more heavily than it does the SPD position. In two separate regression equations where the median voter is the independent variable and the CDU/CSU and SPD are the respective dependent variables, the amount of explained variance is over eight times higher in the CDU/CSU equation.

**Model Summary: SPD position predicted by Median Voter position**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.033(a)	.001	-.082	9.48557

a Predictors: (Constant), left(-100) --- right(+100)

**Model Summary: CDU/CSU position predicted by Median Voter position**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.825(a)	.680	.654	10.72360

a Predictors: (Constant), left(-100) --- right(+100)

About sixty-five percent of the variance observed in the CDU/CSU position over time can be accounted for by the positioning of the median voter. This is a particularly strong relationship suggesting that the CDU/CSU uses the median voter position as a central determinant in its positioning of itself.

In sum, the SPD shows more ideological independence from the position of the median voter than does the CDU/CSU. Where the CDU/CSU only rarely deviates from the pattern and position of the median voter, the SPD regularly deviates. The median voter position is a strong predictor of the CDU/CSU position. In terms of magnitude, the SPD is farther away from the median voter position more often and with greater magnitude than the CDU/CSU. Finally, distance from the median voter appears to affect the CDU/CSU chances at winning the power to govern more directly than it does the SPD chances at governing. Overall, the SPD is tied less to the position of the median voter than is the CDU/CSU. In terms of the Kirchheimer thesis, the CDU/CSU appears to be more instrumentalist as it conforms to the catch-all characterization while the SPD appears to deviate from the center proposition of the median voter. Although this data does not measure the SPD party members' collective ideological position in a way that it might be compared with that of the party according to its manifestos, one may surmise that the SPD is more ideologically true to its core constituency than is the CDU/CSU. This assumes both that there is some ideological logic to the strategic behavior of the SPD. Yet, this appears to be the case, given that the SPD wins office to govern even when it is often farther away from the median voter, as it obviously is having some widespread appeal during those times, which suggests a loyal support base.

### **Is partisanship declining?**

According to the Kirchheimer thesis, parties become increasingly less significant as identifiers and differentiators as the catch-all party replaces traditional mass parties. Therefore, Kirchheimer would expect partisanship to be declining as catch-allism continues to substantiate its hold on the German party system over time. This section assesses the level of partisanship in the German party system, looking at several factors including party membership, electoral volatility, and voter loyalty in terms of aggregate constituency retention.

Party membership grew in Germany through the early 1980s, but then stagnated and went into sharp decline by the end of that decade (Scarrow 2002, 83). Susan Scarrow has found evidence of increased electoral volatility from 1961 to 1998, yet indicates that much movement occurs within the left block of parties or the right block of parties. She suggests that this may mean ideology matters and that dealignment has not occurred in the German party system during this period (2002, 81).

Party loyalty appears to be in decline, most clearly from 1980 forward with “vote-switching” growing from sixteen percent in 1980 to twenty-four percent in 1994 (Conradt 1996). Table 4 compares the relative gains and losses using electoral results.

**Table 4. Election Returns and Percent Change 1949-1998**

	CDU/CSU %	CDU/CSU gain or loss	SPD %	SPD gain or loss
<b>1949</b>	31		29.2	
<b>1953</b>	45.2	(+)14.2	28.8	(-)0.4
<b>1957</b>	50.2	(+)5	31.7	(+)18
<b>1961</b>	45.3	(-)4.9	36.2	(+)4.5
<b>1965</b>	47.6	(+)2.3	39.3	(+)3.1
<b>1969</b>	46	(-)1.6	42.7	(+)3.4
<b>1972</b>	44.8	(-)1.2	45.8	(+)3.1
<b>1976</b>	48.6	(+)3.8	42.6	(-)3.2
<b>1980</b>	44.5	(-)4.1	42.9	(+)0.3
<b>1983</b>	48.7	(+)4.2	38.2	(-)4.7
<b>1987</b>	44.2	(-)4.5	37	(-)1.2
<b>1990</b>	43.8	(-)0.4	33.5	(-)3.5
<b>1994</b>	41.5	(-)2.3	36.4	(+)2.9
<b>1998</b>	35.2	(-)6.4	40.9	(+)4.5

After the first two elections after the Federal Republic was formed, change exceeds five percent only once in 1998, when the CDU/CSU lost 6.4 percent of its vote share from the previous election. Otherwise, the changes from year to year are relatively insignificant. This suggests that the two mainstream parties appear to be holding on to the majority of their constituency base over time.

In sum, party membership has declined and electoral volatility appears to have increased through 1998. However, the magnitude of voter disloyalty appears to be quite mild, in terms of the modest rate of change evident in electoral returns over time. Perhaps a complete dealignment has been avoided, as voters move their support around the partisan spectrum while not obviously crossing ideological lines. More investigation of the vote shift is warranted in making this assessment, but this general observation lends support for the proposition espoused by other studies that vote shifts may keep ideological blocks intact with voters moving around within the left and right rather than across the left and right (Scarrow 2002; Dalton and Rohrschneider 1990; Schmitt and Holmberg 1994). If this hypothesis can be confirmed with further investigation, then Kirchheimer may be incorrect on this account as left / right ideology may still account for voter positioning to a large degree.

### **Evaluating the 2005 German Elections**

This paper is a first step in the analysis of the most recent German elections according to the Kirchheimer proposition. Here, a framework of analysis for the Kirchheimer thesis has been offered. In this section some general observations regarding the most recent German elections within the Kirchheimer framework of analysis will be presented, although continued work on this project should produce more definitive

analysis of this case. In addition to more systematic evaluation specific to the German elections of 2005 of each of the three factors considered integral in this paper for the Kirchheimer thesis, the manifestos should be analyzed to expand the dataset to include the 2002 and 2005 elections.

One of the most striking features of the 2005 election is the narrow margin of one percent of the vote separating the two parties. Also notable is the fact that both the 2002 and 2005 elections are the only instances since 1949 where popular electoral support for the parties has fallen below the forty percent mark for both parties simultaneously.

**Table 5. Difference in Electoral Support for CDU/CSU and SPD 1949-2005**

	CDU/CSU %	CDU/CSU gain or loss	SPD %	SPD gain or loss	% difference b/tw the parties
1949	31		29.2		1.8
1953	45.2	(+)14.2	28.8	(-)0.4	16.4
1957	50.2	(+)5	31.7	(+)18	18.5
1961	45.3	(-)4.9	36.2	(+)4.5	9.1
1965	47.6	(+)2.3	39.3	(+)3.1	8.3
1969	46	(-)1.6	42.7	(+)3.4	3.3
1972	44.8	(-)1.2	45.8	(+)3.1	-1
1976	48.6	(+)3.8	42.6	(-)3.2	6
1980	44.5	(-)4.1	42.9	(+)0.3	1.6
1983	48.7	(+)4.2	38.2	(-)4.7	10.5
1987	44.2	(-)4.5	37	(-)1.2	7.2
1990	43.8	(-)0.4	33.5	(-)3.5	10.3
1994	41.5	(-)2.3	36.4	(+)2.9	5.1
1998	35.2	(-)6.4	40.9	(+)4.5	-5.7
2002	38.5		38.5		0
2005	35.2		34.2		1

Despite relatively strong voter turnout of 79.1 percent in 2005 and 77.7 percent in 2002, voters seemed split between the two parties. At the same time as being equally divided, the overall levels of support fell to their lowest levels since 1949, dipping below forty percent. With the 2005 election results, the popular mandate for the two mainstream parties to govern dipped below seventy percent for only the second time in the history of the Federal Republic, where the first instance of such low levels of support came in the first federal elections in 1949.

**Table 6. Aggregate support for the two mainstream parties since 1949**

	combined % of support
1949	60.2
1953	74
1957	81.9
1961	81.5
1965	86.9
1969	88.7
1972	90.6
1976	91.2
1980	87.4
1983	86.9
1987	81.2
1990	77.3
1994	77.9
1998	76.1
2002	77
2005	69.4

Thus the German party system seems to have returned to an uncertain and precarious position for the first time since the immediate postwar election. The combination of narrow margins of separation between the two parties and low levels of aggregate support across these two parties gives cause for some alarm. The 2005 result indicates that voters are turning away from the two mainstream parties altogether in favor of smaller parties, suggesting that the two catch-all parties have lost favor with the German public. This would seem to suggest a benchmark year for the Kirchheimer proposition, where the full impact of catch-all parties creating a crisis of representation within the party system may have been reached.

A curiosity raised by this project to date regards the behavior of parties prior to the first grand coalition and one direction for the remainder of the project is to evaluate and compare circumstances and behavior in the party system prior to the first grand coalition from 1966-1969 with that of the second grand coalition beginning in 2005. One striking difference from the analysis here is that the 1965 election produced an aggregate mandate for the two mainstream parties of nearly 87 percent, while the 2005 election

produced only a 69.4 percent mandate. Plausibly, more than seventeen percent of the German electorate was represented by the previous grand coalition than is represented with the present one.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has attempted to develop a framework for analyzing the Kirchheimer thesis regarding the decline of meaningful partisan opposition in Western Europe after the Second World War. Three propositions have been extracted from the Kirchheimer thesis to and evaluative criteria have been discerned from them. First, where parties move in tandem, Kirchheimer is confirmed. Second, where parties converge at the ideological center, Kirchheimer is confirmed. Third, where party membership and voter loyalty to parties declines, Kirchheimer is confirmed.

Kirchheimer made his prediction not just for the German party system but across Western Europe. Therefore one section of this paper evaluated elements of the Kirchheimer thesis across Western Europe with the party failure thesis generally. The cross-national finding was that mainstream parties appear to be generally responding to voter preferences. Between one-fifth and one-quarter of the positioning of MSL and MSR parties can be attributed to the positions taken by voters. This suggests a significant amount of party responsiveness and adaptation to popular concerns. Yet, at the same time the parties are behaving strategically with seventy-five percent or more of their variation owing to factors besides the preference of the median voter. This seems somewhat contrary to the Kirchheimer proposition, as he would expect more complete mimicking of the median voter.

However, in a more refined evaluation of all three propositions from the Kirchheimer thesis to the German case, there are mixed findings suggesting some but not total support for the Kirchheimer thesis. On the first proposition of parties moving in tandem, the evidence from two different indicators suggests different findings. On the one hand, parties seem to converge more than they diverge in terms of their general pattern of ideological shifting and its trend over time. This would support Kirchheimer. Yet the parties maintain ideological distance throughout times of convergence, indicating that they keep their distinctive positions. Taken together, a similar pattern combined with ideological differentiation would not fully support the Kirchheimer proposition. On the second proposition that parties converge in the center and closely approximate the median voter position, the CDU/CSU appears more likely to do so than the SPD in the German party system. Thus the CDU/CSU seems to behave more as Kirchheimer would expect, while the SPD behaves more independently and perhaps ideologically. On the third proposition regarding the decline of partisanship and party loyalty, Kirchheimer appears at first glance to be correct. Declines are apparent on these indicators. However, the logical extent of his argument would suggest chaos as the party ideological spectrum becomes meaningless. Some evidence suggests that party ideological blocks still matter, even if party loyalty to individual parties has declined. Therefore, the result may not be as dire as Kirchheimer had envisioned. More consideration of this possibility is needed. In sum, Kirchheimer was not found to be completely correct on any of these three propositions in the German case, although there is partial confirmation for some of his ideas.

A future endeavor of this project will be to continue to apply the logic of the Kirchheimer thesis to the evidence from the German elections of 2005. Preliminary analysis of that election above suggests that the German catch-all parties appear to have reached crisis levels in 2005, with their popular mandate reaching lows second only to the 1949 election and with one of the lowest margins of separation in postwar history. However, further case study of this election is necessary to determine whether the Kirchheimer thesis can truly be confirmed or denied given the evidence of the 2005 German election.

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