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3 *Changing coalitional preferences among West German parties*

(a) Introduction

In 1949, deputies of ten parties and three independents were elected into the first Bundestag (federal legislature) of the Federal Republic. At that time, it was by no means clear whether the high fractionalisation that had been characteristic of the Weimar Reichstag would continue in the new legislature. However, Adenauer was able to form a government coalition including only three parties which disposed of 52 per cent majority of the seats.[1] Throughout the fifties, a process of concentration among the political parties represented in the Bundestag took place, which reduced the number to four in 1957 and to three in 1961. It is only since 1983 that, with the newly founded Green party (*Die Grünen*), a fourth party came again into the game. Nevertheless, only once, in 1957, did the Christian Democrats win an absolute majority in the Bundestag, and coalition governments have been the rule.

In this chapter, I shall limit myself to studying the coalitional behaviour of the political parties in the period between 1968 and 1982, when only three parties played a significant role in West Germany, i.e. the Christian Democratic party (CDU/CSU), the Social Democratic party (SPD) and the liberal Free Democratic party (FDP). Under the conditions of this party system, aside from the possibility of an all-party coalition which was never formed, three coalitions of two parties are possible and have in fact come into existence. In the language of formal coalition theory, all three are *minimal winning coalitions*, while only the Social-Liberal coalition governments of 1969, 1976 and 1980 were also *smallest-size coalitions*.

Coalition theory offers two possible explanations for the fact that the Grand Coalition[2] of the two big parties CDU/CSU and SPD lasted for only three years,

while coalitions of one of the big parties with the much smaller liberal party have prevailed.[3] The first considers only payoffs in terms of portfolios which will be larger under the latter condition. The second explanation has to do with the programmatic distances between the parties. Under the assumption of a single left-right policy continuum on which the FDP as the *centre party* is located somewhere between the CDU/CSU on the right and the SPD on the left, a grand coalition does not fulfil the criterion of a *minimum-connected winning coalition* which predicts that coalitions will be formed between ideologically adjacent parties. While the assumption that the FDP is located in the centre of the party space has been questioned by some authors, e.g. by Grofman (1982), it will be shown in a later section that it is indeed correct in many respects.[4]

Thus, the smallest size as well as the minimum-connected winning criterion both grant a pivotal role to the FDP in the West German party system. This is manifested in the formation of governments as well as during their existence. The FDP decides whether a Christian Democrat or a Social Democrat is elected as Chancellor. All major changes in government have been initiated by the FDP. Its withdrawal from the long-standing Christian-Liberal coalition with the Christian Democrats in 1966 paved the way for the Grand Coalition and later for the formation of the first federal government without the CDU/CSU, i.e. the Social–Liberal coalition which took over in 1969. In 1982 its renewed turn towards the Christian Democrats restored the former configuration. Thus, changes in federal government have to date always been brought about by decisions of the party elites and particularly by the FDP leadership rather than by the voters whose voting behaviour is remarkably stable and shows no major shifts from one election to the next (Gibowski 1981; Troitzsch 1980: 225ff).

The pivotal role of the FDP is also borne out by the fact that it has achieved a higher participation rate in state and federal governments than any other party. On the federal level, it was a member of 70 per cent of the federal governments that have been formed thus far (14 out of 19). In terms of the duration of its participation in governments, this rate is even somewhat higher: it has participated in the federal government for 311 out of the 424 months from September 1949 until the end of 1984 (73.3 per cent) (cf. Haungs 1983).

Two more characteristics of West German coalitional behaviour are worth noting. The first is that not all coalitions are equally likely at a certain point in time, even if they are all possible in principle (*allgemeine Koalitionsfähigkeit*). Secondly, coalitions are rarely formed as a result of post-electoral negotiations among the parties. Instead, the intention to form a certain coalition is usually stated before an election takes place, and the public is aware beforehand of which government will be formed under which electoral conditions.[5]

In the light of the remarkable stability of coalition governments in the Federal Republic, it seems particularly interesting to study the reasons for the rarely occurring changes in coalition. Four factors seem of relevance in this respect.

The first and most obvious reason is *growing policy differences* between the

partners of a governing coalition. Partial disagreements are, of course, normal in any co-operation of two distinct parties. As long as the current priorities allow the execution of policies in which the common goals outweigh the programmatic differences, disagreement in less relevant policy areas can be played down by neglecting them, i.e. avoiding decision-making matters on which agreement cannot be achieved (Norpoth 1982: 17). During the Grand Coalition, this strategy was explicitly followed and denominated as the *Ausklammern* ('discarding') of controversial issues.[6]

However, once the commonalities are exhausted and priorities change, either by internal developments of the parties or enforced by events beyond the control of the party elites (e.g. the oil shock or rising unemployment rates), the strain within a governing coalition can become unbearable and make its dissolution mandatory.

A second factor is changes in *the degree of sympathy or dislike between the parties*. While this will normally be highly interrelated with ideological distance, it nevertheless constitutes a dimension of its own. This becomes clear when we consider the inevitable frustrations arising from the continuous necessity to reach compromises in a coalition, or the often highly polemic style of the political debate between government and opposition. Both may lead to a higher degree of dislike between parties than might be expected from policy distances alone. In contrast, during the formation of a new coalition and during the first time of its existence, sympathy and goodwill among the parties involved will be greater and may help to bridge policy disagreements. In West Germany, the expression *Koalitionsklima* ('coalitional climate') has become a widely used label for the degree of strain in intra-coalitional co-operation.

In countries, however, where all parties are oriented towards participation in government, as is the case in West Germany (Smith 1979: 137), a coalition will normally not be dissolved before the opportunity to form an alternative coalition is available. The contours of this new coalition should already be distinguishable in a rapprochement between the new partners in policy positions as well as in mutual sympathy. This is also favoured by the constitutional requirement for a 'constructive vote of no confidence'.

Thirdly, one can assume that the decision for coalitional change will also depend on considerations of electoral success, and this tends to caution against such a change being rapid. An *erosion in public support* for the governing parties may contribute to the dissolution of a governing coalition. Conversely, the decision to form a new coalition will only be made if its partners expect that they have a realistic chance to win the next election. In that respect, voter attitudes are an important factor in coalitional behaviour. Competence ratings of the different parties, coalitional preferences and the evaluations of the present government will be taken into account by the party leaders, even if they can expect that a certain part of their supporters will vote for them regardless of their coalitional behaviour.

Finally, the immediate social environment of the party leaders should not be neglected. They do not operate in a social vacuum and their behaviour is not only influenced by their own goals and expectations of electoral success, but also by the policy and coalition preferences of important reference groups such as party activists and party members, as well as interest groups and those parts of the mass media which normally support them. Thus, even if a government still enjoys a high amount of public support, a *loss in support among elites* may contribute to its dissolution.

This chapter will try to determine how far these factors have played a role in the formation and dissolution of the Social–Liberal coalition between 1968 and 1982. Apart from references to generally available evidence, the analysis will be primarily based on survey data of elites and voters gathered since 1968. In order to study the dynamic relations between the different factors in detail and to determine their relative importance, time series data would, of course, be needed. In particular, the question of how policy disagreements are related to the decline in mutual sympathy between the partners of a coalition and whether these two, in turn, are the cause or rather consequence of a withdrawal of public support is beyond the scope of our data. By looking at the positions of different groups of elites and voters at different points in time, it is, however, possible to identify those groups which were ahead of others in their evaluations of parties and coalitions in 1968/9 and in 1981/2, i.e. opinion leaders who played an important role in the opinion formation during both periods of coalitional change.

(b) Data base

Three national elite surveys carried out in 1968, 1972 and 1981 constitute the major data base for a systematic analysis of the changes in the coalitional preferences of elites. It would go too far in the present context to describe the sampling design of the studies in detail.[7] Suffice it to note that the positional approach was used to identify elites, and that political as well as non-political elites were included in the studies.

The *political elites* include the members of federal and state governments as well as the leaders of political parties and parliamentary parties (*Fraktionen*) on federal and state level. Among the *non-political elites*, holders of leadership positions in other sectors were interviewed, i.e. in civil service, business, trade unions, mass media, etc. Although small in size and of little numerical relevance as voters, the non-political elites nevertheless serve as important reference groups for political leaders. Their attitudes are, therefore, relevant for political decision-making.

In the context of the intended analysis, information on voter attitudes is relevant for two reasons. As was mentioned before, voter attitudes are taken into account by the political elites. Secondly, a joint analysis of elite and voter attitudes is necessary in order to study the dynamics of public opinion formation.

Table 3.1 *Surveys used for the analysis*

Name of survey	*n*	Time of survey
Elite survey, 1968	808	Jan.–May 1968
Pre-election study, 1969, population 21 years and over	1,158	Sept. 1969
Elite survey, 1972	1,825	Feb.–July 1972
Pre-election study, 1972, population 18 years and over	2,052	Sept.–Oct. 1972
Elite survey, 1981	1,744	Mar.–July 1981
Population survey, 1982, population 16 years and over	2,006	Jan.–Feb. 1982

It may help to answer the question as to which groups among elites and voters changed their coalitional preferences earlier than others. For that purpose, an attempt was made to find general population surveys carried out at about the same time as the elite surveys. For 1969 and 1972 the pre-election surveys of the German Electoral Data project[8] could be used. Unfortunately, the 1969 survey took place more than a year after the first elite survey. By that time it was already clear, at least to a considerable part of the West German public, that the FDP had moved towards the SPD, whereas this was much less obvious in 1968. The third general population survey used for the analysis was part of the West German elite study of 1981. It was, however, carried out only at the beginning of 1982 for technical reasons. Table 3.1 gives some basic information about the six surveys used for analysis.

(c) Coalitional preferences of voters

Tables 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 show the distributions of coalitional preferences of elites and voters in 1968/9, 1972 and 1981/2. The number of response categories differed somewhat between the studies, but each included the following five categories:

- government by the SPD alone
- government by the CDU/CSU alone
- Social–Liberal coalition, SPD–FDP
- Christian–Liberal coalition, CDU/CSU–FDP
- Grand Coalition, CDU/CSU–SPD.

The missing value categories (others, NA) were omitted from the computations. This seems justified since normally only about 10 per cent of the respondents fell into one of these categories.[9] For the purpose of these analyses, elites and voters were broken down by vote intention, which can be assumed to have a decisive influence on which government one prefers.

Apart from their descriptive value, the survey data on the development of coalitional preferences of elites and voters are particularly suited to studying the sequence of opinion formation. They can help to explore the degree of latitude

party leaders enjoy with regard to their coalitional behaviour. Some authors have claimed that this latitude is less pronounced in West Germany than in other countries because strong normative expectations have developed, restricting the coalitional options available to party leaders. In discussing coalitional behaviour in the Federal Republic, Smith concludes that 'new rules of coalitions' have been established in 1969 which not only oblige party leaders to declare their coalitional intentions before an election takes place, but also to treat them as binding commitments for the whole legislative term (Smith 1979: 141). If this is true, voter reactions to changing coalitional arrangements should be particularly strong and put severe limits on the latitude of party leaders. It does not, however, preclude coalitional changes being initiated by party leaders as long as these norms are not violated.

The empirical results can shed some light on these processes by showing under what conditions voters are willing to follow the coalitional decisions taken by party elites. Survey data analysed by Norpoth indicate that the coalitional preferences of the voters of all parties change in accordance with the coalitional decisions made by the party leadership. Between 1965 and 1969, preference for the Grand Coalition increased among Christian Democratic voters from 37 per cent to 83 per cent.

SPD voters had favoured this coalition already in 1965 by a margin of 70 per cent, which remained constant until the 1969 election (Norpoth 1980: 429). After the formation of the Social–Liberal coalition, however, SPD voters reversed their preference ratio for the Social–Liberal vs. the Grand Coalition (Norpoth 1980: 431f).

No comparable change could be found among Christian Democratic and Liberal voters. Whereas the former clung to their previous choices, a majority of the latter had already been in favour of the new coalition before the election (Norpoth 1980: 432). Changes among the FDP voters had, thus, already occurred before the 1969 election. Support for the Christian–Liberal coalition dropped to a bare 23 per cent in 1969, while preference for the Social-Liberal coalition increased from 22 per cent to 56 per cent.

In counting these margins, Norpoth had to disregard, however, the considerable number of voters of the two big parties favouring a single-party government. Thus, for 30 per cent of the CDU/CSU and for 41 per cent of the SPD voters, preference for either of the coalitional constellations is not known. Nevertheless, the presumption that voter preferences follow elite decisions is further supported by the sympathy ratings for the different parties. In 1969, the average rating of Christian Democratic voters for the SPD was higher (+1.6) than that for the FDP (+0.4). Before the formation of the Grand Coalition, instead, both parties had got the same average score: SPD +0.4 and FDP +0.2.

Conversely, SPD voters in 1969 preferred the CDU/CSU (+1.7) to the FDP (+0.7). Notwithstanding this, the FDP scored higher among SPD voters in 1969 than during the years before. While its average sympathy score had always been

Table 3.2 *Coalition preferences of elites and voters, 1968/9*
Percentages based on respondents with preference for one of the governments listed below

	n	SPD alone *n* (%)	CDU/CSU alone *n* (%)	SPD–FDP Social–Liberal coalition *n* (%)	CDU/CSU –FDP Christian–Liberal coalition *n* (%)	CDU/CSU –SPD Grand Coalition *n* (%)
Political elite						
SPD	50	41 (82.0)	2 (4.0)	3 (6.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (8.0)
CDU/CSU	52	0 (0.0)	44 (84.6)	0 (0.0)	5 (9.6)	3 (5.8)
FDP	18	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	11 (61.1)	6 (33.3)	1 (5.6)
Non-political elites						
SPD supporters	223	126 (57.0)	14 (6.3)	30 (13.6)	1 (0.5)	50 (22.6)
CDU/CSU supporters	324	4 (1.3)	172 (53.8)	5 (1.6)	48 (15.0)	91 (28.4)
FDP supporters	97	7 (7.4)	6 (6.4)	37 (39.4)	31 (33.0)	13 (13.8)
All non-political elites	688	138 (20.8)	204 (30.7)	74 (11.1)	82 (12.3)	167 (25.1)
Population						
SPD voters	451	174 (41.2)	3 (0.7)	80 (19.0)	1 (0.2)	164 (38.9)
CDU/CSU voters	438	6 (1.5)	122 (30.0)	5 (1.2)	39 (9.6)	234 (57.6)
FDP voters	44	2 (5.0)	0 (0.0)	21 (52.5)	9 (22.5)	8 (20.0)
Population total	1,158	193 (19.5)	141 (14.2)	116 (11.7)	57 (5.8)	483 (48.8)

negative until the presidential election in March 1969, where the FDP deputies had voted for the SPD candidate Heinemann, it became positive for the first time after that event (+0.2). The increase for the CDU/CSU was, however, more pronounced: in October 1966, shortly before the formation of the Grand Coalition, it had still been as low as −0.3 (figures reported in Klingemann and Pappi 1970: 129). Among FDP voters, the CDU/CSU had a slight lead over the SPD in 1966, which was reversed for the first time after the Heinemann election. In the pre-election study of 1969, they ranked the SPD (+1.9) better than the Christian Democrats (+1.6).

In 1972, after three years of Social–Liberal coalition, preference for the Grand Coalition option had gone down to only 20 per cent among SPD voters. The majority of SPD and FDP voters supported the governing Social–Liberal

coalition, while 58 per cent of the Christian Democratic voters preferred the SPD to the FDP and only 39 per cent the other way round (Norpoth 1980: 429).[10] These figures remained remarkably constant until the beginning of 1982 (cf. Tables 3.3 and 3.4).

With regard to FDP voters, we are in the unique position that in addition to survey results their actual voting behaviour also gives clues about coalitional preferences. In federal elections FDP voters, to a much higher degree than voters of the big parties, make use of split-ticket voting. While casting their second, decisive vote for the FDP list, many of them use the opportunity to give their first vote to the candidate of another party.[11] Split-ticket voting was particularly frequent in 1972, 1980 and 1983: in these elections more than half of the voters with a second vote for the FDP gave their first vote to the candidate of another party. In 1972 and 1980, the vast majority of these first votes was cast for the SPD candidate, while in 1983 nearly 83 per cent of them went to the Christian Democratic candidate (Berger *et al.* 1983: 558; Schultze 1983: 70).

At first glance this may look like an impressive shift of FDP voters towards the newly-installed Christian–Liberal coalition. It is, however, often maintained that these split-ticket voters are not genuine FDP voters, but rather supporters of either SPD or CDU/CSU who want the FDP to surmount the 5 per cent quorum needed to enter the Bundestag in order to save the existing government (so-called *Leihstimmen*). This interpretation is fostered by the fact that journalists as well as politicians have indeed sometimes recommended using that strategy.

Naturally, the ballot itself does not allow us to distinguish between these interpretations. But the observed shifts in split-ticket voting should alert us to a major problem involved in studying electoral support for the parties over time, namely that a high amount of individual-level change in voting behaviour might be involved. Panel studies have regularly shown that even relatively stable aggregate results disguise considerable shifts on the individual level. It cannot be ruled out, particularly for a small party like the FDP, that changes in coalitional preferences and split-ticket voting are primarily caused by an exchange of voters. Data on individual-level change are therefore needed in order to substantiate the presumption that voters change their coalitional preferences rather than their voting behaviour in reaction to the changing coalitional behaviour of party leaders.

In analysing the pre- and post-election panel study of 1969 and the recall question for the 1965 election, Norpoth was able to show that this was indeed the case for most of the voters of the two big parties. They accepted the coalitional strategies of their party leaders, and did not sanction them by withdrawing voting support or by means of lower sympathy ratings (Norpoth 1980: 434). In contrast to SPD and CDU/CSU voters, however, Norpoth found more serious fluctuations among FDP voters in reaction to coalitional changes of the FDP. 'Only 40% of the previous (1965) FDP voters indicate a vote intention or decision for the party in 1969. It comes as no surprise that the FDP came perilously close

Table 3.3 *Coalition preferences of elites and voters, 1972*
Percentages based on respondents with preference for one of the governments listed below

	n	SPD alone *n* (%)	CDU/CSU alone *n* (%)	SPD–FDP Social–Liberal coalition *n* (%)	CDU/CSU –FDP Christian–Liberal coalition *n* (%)	CDU/CSU –SPD Grand Coalition *n* (%)
Political elite						
SPD	110	78 (72.2)	0 (0.0)	28 (25.9)	2 (1.9)	0 (0.0)
CDU/CSU	128	1 (0.8)	110 (88.0)	0 (0.0)	7 (5.6)	7 (5.6)
FDP	47	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	46 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Non-political elites						
SPD supporters	456	206 (47.1)	4 (0.9)	182 (41.6)	4 (0.9)	41 (9.4)
CDU/CSU supporters	806	4 (0.5)	301 (40.9)	9 (1.2)	228 (31.0)	194 (26.4)
FDP supporters	203	2 (1.1)	1 (0.5)	130 (71.4)	34 (18.7)	15 (8.2)
All non-political elites	1,540	214 (15.3)	318 (22.8)	325 (23.3)	277 (19.9)	261 (18.7)
Non-political elites: selected reference groups						
Media elite, SPD supporters	119	45 (39.1)	1 (0.9)	55 (47.8)	1 (0.9)	13 (11.3)
Media elite, CDU/CSU supporters	107	0 (0.0)	40 (40.8)	2 (2.0)	22 (22.4)	34 (34.7)
Media elite, FDP supporters	42	1 (2.7)	0 (0.0)	28 (75.7)	6 (16.2)	2 (5.4)
Business elite, CDU/CSU supporters	320	2 (0.7)	102 (34.7)	1 (0.3)	124 (42.2)	65 (22.1)
Business elite, FDP supporters	59	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	29 (55.8)	18 (34.6)	5 (9.6)
Trade union elite, SPD supporters	42	33 (80.5)	0 (0.0)	8 (19.5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Population						
SPD voters	942	303 (33.6)	9 (1.0)	456 (50.6)	16 (1.8)	117 (13.0)
CDU/CSU voters	666	8 (1.3)	350 (55.7)	9 (1.4)	107 (17.0)	154 (24.5)
FDP voters	122	8 (6.9)	4 (3.4)	69 (59.5)	26 (22.4)	9 (7.8)
Population total	2,052	349 (18.7)	422 (22.7)	582 (31.3)	173 (9.3)	336 (18.0)

to extinction in that election, barely exceeding the 5% minimum of the total vote' (Norpoth 1980: 435).

Zülch estimates that even less than 25 per cent of its voters of 1965 voted for the FDP in 1969 (1972: 87f). The assumption of an exchange of FDP voters in reaction to the formation of the Social–Liberal coalition in 1969 is further confirmed by studies showing that the FDP electorate has undergone considerable changes in its social composition. It lost support among the self-employed old middle class that constituted its traditional voter base (Klingemann and Pappi 1970: 124ff; Pappi 1973: 200; Zülch 1972: 97). Although the FDP still draws a good deal of its voters from this class, the majority of them come from the new middle class whose members generally show much less stable party affiliations (Pappi 1973: 210f). This means that the FDP does not command a stable, socio-economically defined voter basis, as the two big parties do, which can rely on majority support among Catholics (CDU/CSU) or trade union members (SPD) (Fliszar and Gibowski 1984: 70; Kaack 1980: 40ff). This makes the party dependent on floating voters who cast their votes according to issue considerations rather than traditional loyalties or stable party identification.

Altogether, the empirical results show that norms regulating the coalitional behaviour of the parties coexist with a high degree of latitude for party elites to pursue their coalitional strategies. While Christian Democratic and Social Democratic voters are willing to accept the coalitional policies their parties adopt and change their coalitional preferences in accordance with those policies, voters of the Free Democrats are extremely sensitive to the coalitional behaviour of the FDP leadership. This was demonstrated in 1969, and it presumably happened again in 1982. The FDP losses after the formation of the Christian–Liberal coalition in 1982 were even more severe than those in the aftermath of 1969. Even when the party managed to return to the Bundestag in 1983 with 7 per cent of the votes, it failed to surmount the 5 per cent barrier in no less than six out of eight state elections from autumn 1982.[12] Whether the strong reactions were a consequence of the violation of the coalitional commitment made by the FDP leadership before the 1980 election, namely to support Helmut Schmidt's government for the whole legislative term, is not known. The earlier losses in the 1969 election, where the coalitional change had taken place while the FDP was in opposition, indicate, however, that the very decision to form a new coalition was a more important factor than the violation of the norms of 'fair' coalitional behaviour.

It seems as if the FDP suffers foremost from its genuinely ambivalent position in the West German cleavage system, which results in a politically heterogeneous voter basis. It constantly has to accommodate an economically conservative wing with a reform-oriented Social–Liberal wing (Broughton and Kirchner, this volume). Any coalition it enters signifies a change in balance between these wings, and results in a loss of the dedicated voters of the 'losing' wing.

The survey data also give some empirical foundation to the normative discussion of whether the formation of specific coalitions is in accordance with

'voter wishes'. We can realistically assume that the voters of the two big parties wish foremost that their party participate in the government. They give the party leadership the leeway to form whatever coalition it considers necessary to pursue this goal. The same, however, is not true for FDP voters. With regard to 1969, it was heavily disputed whether the FDP had stated its intention to form the Social–Liberal coalition clearly enough before the election. While Gringmuth (1984: 39f), Veen (1976: 12) and Zülch (1972: 78) maintain that the party had left the coalition question open during the campaign, other authors claim that it was not only stated in advance but also that this message had reached the FDP voters (Kaase 1970: 48; Smith 1979: 140). Our data as well as those used by Kaase and Zülch (1972: 109) show that a majority of the FDP voters in 1969 indeed favoured the new Social–Liberal coalition.

In 1982 the situation was different. Our survey data show that a majority of 63.4 per cent of the FDP voters still supported the Social–Liberal coalition. Thus, while the exchange of voters in 1969 had taken place before the formation of the new coalition, it occurred only after the toppling of Helmut Schmidt's government in 1982. But again, FDP voters were prompt to react to this move of the FDP leadership.

(d) Coalitional preferences of elites

The results show clearly that the elites in 1968 and 1981 were well ahead of the voters with regard to their coalitional preferences. Whereas in 1968 only one-quarter of the non-political elites were still in favour of the then governing Grand Coalition, the same was true of nearly half of the population. This is even more astonishing given the fact that the population survey took place more than one year later.

One must, however, not forget that the population is in general more in favour of coalition governments than the elites. Whereas in 1968/9 more than 70 per cent of the political elites and more than 50 per cent of the non-political elites preferred a single-party government, only 34 per cent of the population did so. Thus, the smaller numbers for the Grand Coalition among the elites may be at least partly a result of this fact. In order to control for this systematic difference between elites and voters, the sympathy ratings for the different parties were used to ascertain the numbers of the SPD elites who preferred the CDU to the FDP or, rather, the other way round. According to these, 70.8 per cent of the SPD politicians and 55.9 per cent of the SPD supporters[13] in the elites preferred the FDP to the CDU, whereas more than one year later nearly 40 per cent of the SPD voters were still in favour of the Grand Coalition.

In contrast to the results for the SPD, the Christian Democratic politicians and elite supporters were split in their second choice: 59.6 per cent of the former and 64.8 per cent of the latter preferred the SPD to the FDP, and can therefore be classified as favouring the then existing coalition.

Thus, already in 1968 a clear majority of the politicians of the Social–Liberal

Table 3.4 *Coalition preferences of elites and voters, 1981/2*
Percentages based on respondents with preference for one of the governments listed below

	n	SPD alone *n* (%)	CDU/CSU alone *n* (%)	SPD–FDP Social–Liberal coalition *n* (%)	CDU/CSU –FDP Christian–Liberal coalition *n* (%)	CDU/CSU –SPD Grand Coalition *n* (%)
Political elite						
SPD	124	70 (58.8)	0 (0.0)	43 (36.1)	0 (0.0)	6 (5.0)
CDU/CSU	125	0 (0.0)	79 (64.2)	0 (0.0)	39 (31.7)	5 (4.1)
FDP	25	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	20 (80.0)	5 (20.0)	0 (0.0)
Non-political elites						
SPD voters	355	98 (29.9)	0 (0.0)	199 (60.7)	3 (0.9)	28 (8.5)
CDU/CSU voters	647	0 (0.0)	159 (25.4)	8 (1.3)	403 (64.3)	57 (9.1)
FDP voters	283	0 (0.0)	3 (1.2)	108 (41.7)	129 (49.8)	19 (7.3)
All non-political elites	1,470	114 (8.4)	181 (13.4)	353 (26.1)	585 (43.2)	121 (8.9)
Non-political elites: selected reference groups						
Media elite, SPD voters	56	9 (17.6)	0 (0.0)	41 (80.4)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.0)
Media elite, CDU/CSU voters	92	0 (0.0)	19 (20.7)	4 (4.3)	59 (64.1)	10 (10.9)
Media elite, FDP voters	52	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	20 (42.6)	23 (48.9)	4 (8.5)
Business elite, CDU/CSU voters	302	0 (0.0)	68 (23.3)	1 (0.3)	196 (67.1)	27 (9.2)
Business elite, FDP voters	84	0 (0.0)	1 (1.4)	13 (17.6)	54 (73.0)	6 (8.1)
Trade union elite, SPD voters	69	38 (56.7)	0 (0.0)	22 (32.8)	1 (1.5)	6 (9.0)
Population						
SPD voters	528	153 (32.3)	3 (0.6)	271 (57.3)	4 (0.8)	42 (8.9)
CDU/CSU voters	714	6 (0.9)	409 (63.6)	8 (1.2)	176 (27.4)	44 (6.8)
FDP voters	236	3 (1.5)	10 (5.2)	123 (63.4)	46 (23.7)	12 (6.2)
Population total	2,206	187 (12.3)	467 (30.7)	456 (30.0)	272 (17.9)	137 (9.0)

parties and the elite supporters of the SPD wished the new coalition. The FDP supporters in the non-political elites were, however, less clear-cut in their preferences. Their answers were much more dispersed over the whole range of alternatives and only about 40 per cent advocated a Social–Liberal coalition. Noticeably, a sizeable minority of about one-third among FDP leaders and elite supporters alike preferred a return to the old Christian–Liberal coalition.

In 1972, the Social–Liberal coalition enjoyed nearly unanimous support among the politicians and elite supporters of the SPD and FDP alike. Even among FDP supporters, preference for a Christian–Liberal coalition had decreased to only 18.7 per cent. Social Democratic support for the coalition with the FDP again becomes clearer when we take the party rank orders into account. Ninety-eight per cent of the Social Democratic politicians and 87 per cent of their elite supporters preferred the FDP to the Christian Democrats.

For the latter, the situation was much less comfortable. Given the consolidation of the Social–Liberal government, there was little hope of forming a coalition with either of the other parties (Pridham 1982: 149). This is reflected in the rather high number of Christian Democratic politicians who preferred a single-party government by the CDU/CSU. In the light of these figures, the failed attempt to topple the government by co-operating with conservative FDP deputies seems to have been the only realistic way to get back into office.

The high number of respondents in the elite surveys of 1972 and 1981 as compared to 1968 allows a further subdivision of the supporters of the different parties according to their sector location. Thereby, it is possible to study the coalitional preferences of groups which can be assumed to be of particular importance to the party leaders, namely the representatives of those interest groups which traditionally have been closely affiliated with one of the political parties. These are the business leaders who mainly support the CDU/CSU (1981: 65.8 per cent), but also the FDP (18.3 per cent), and the trade union leaders who are predominantly affiliated with the SPD (79.3 per cent). Additionally, the supporters of the three parties in the media elite have been analysed separately. Their coalitional preferences seem particularly important since they have the unique opportunity to communicate them to a larger public.[14]

Two results in Table 3.3 deserve special mention. Among the business leaders with an FDP preference, only a slight majority of 55.8 per cent supported the Social–Liberal coalition in 1972, whereas a sizeable minority of 34.6 per cent still advocated a Christian–Liberal coalition. Equally remarkable is that also 42.2 per cent of the CDU/CSU supporters in the business elite favoured this coalition. Thus, the business elite continued to be a stronghold of advocates of a Christian–Liberal coalition even at a time when the formation of such a coalition was extremely unlikely.

The second interesting result concerns the trade union leaders. They overwhelmingly favoured a single-party government by the SPD. While this was never a realistic possibility, their preference nevertheless reflects the big distance

between trade unions and the FDP, which posed a serious problem for the SPD leadership, who had to deal with both groups.

In 1981, a clear majority of Christian Democrats in the non-political elites favoured the formation of a Christian–Liberal coalition. On the other hand, more than 60 per cent of the CDU/CSU leaders and voters advocated a single-party government by the CDU/CSU. If we again take the party rank orders into account, it becomes, however, quite clear that the FDP was predominantly preferred over the Social Democrats.

Among the Free Democrats, the elite supporters already showed a slight plurality (49.8 per cent) in favour of a coalition with the CDU/CSU. This majority is particularly high among the FDP supporters in the business elite (73.0 per cent). In contrast, 80 per cent of the FDP politicians interviewed and 63.4 per cent of the voters of that party still clung to the Social–Liberal coalition.

With regard to the FDP politicians, the possibility cannot be ruled out that those who pursued the coalitional change most actively were less willing to be interviewed. But even if we assume that all 15 FDP leaders who were in the original sample but refused to be interviewed were in favour of a coalitional change, it would only indicate an equal split among the FDP leadership in 1981. Instead, it seems more realistic that the actual relation was about 65 per cent to 35 per cent in favour of the Social–Liberal coalition. The fact that the change could be effected already slightly more than a year later should remind us of two basic reservations to be made when predicting political decisions from survey data. The first is that there exist considerable differences of power even among top elites which cannot be accounted for in looking only at the distribution of attitudes. The second is the fact that political processes can develop considerable dynamics which cannot be studied by survey methodology.

The data also give some support for the assumption that FDP leaders perceived the coalition question as a matter of tactics rather than conviction. While 80 per cent of them indicated a preference for the Social–Liberal coalition, the party rank orders show that only 32 per cent of them preferred the SPD over the CDU. Forty-four per cent instead preferred the CDU and 24 per cent gave equal ratings for both big parties. The respective proportions among the FDP supporters in the non-political elites are the following: 33.6 per cent for the SPD, 50.5 per cent for the CDU, and 15.9 per cent equal ratings.

The vast majority of the Social Democratic elites, finally, were still in favour of the Social–Liberal coalition. What seems, however, more important with regard to the SPD is that the number of supporters of a single-party government has declined since 1972. One explanation of this rather unexpected result could be that the confidence in the SPD's capability of solving the pending economic problems had decreased at the beginning of the 1980s even among SPD leaders and supporters. Another possibility which cannot be ruled out is that a number of conservative Social Democrats in the elites, with regard to the more radical wing in their own party, appreciated the retarding role of the FDP more than they could admit in public.

(e) Party support and the choice of coalitional strategies

It was said before that the perceived chances of winning electoral support influence the strategies followed by the political elites. Even when it could be shown that voters by and large approve of the coalitional decisions taken by the political leaders by changing their coalitional preferences accordingly, there are limits to elite manipulation of public opinion. This is not only true for FDP voters who are particularly prone to reacting to party decisions not in accord with what they consider adequate, but also for the loyal followers of the big parties, though to a lesser degree.

While voter attitudes give only scarce information on what parties and governments should do in a certain situation, dissatisfaction with political outputs will inevitably lead to a withdrawal of support. Thus, voter attitudes serve as restrictions rather than as guidelines for elite behaviour. Accordingly, elites assess the current mood among the voters and calculate voter reactions to their own behaviour. They also have more or less accurate hypotheses as to what decisions will or will not be accepted.

In this vein, voter evaluations of government performance are particularly relevant for coalitional behaviour, since the partners of a governing coalition are not normally held equally responsible for it. It seems therefore natural that each party tries to claim responsibility for successful actions while blaming failures on the other party or parties. In the case of a continuous failure of a government to cope with pending problems, such a disposition of a governmental party will, however, become impossible in the long run. When this becomes apparent, the dissolution of the existing coalition may be considered as a reasonable strategy for party survival.

This was obviously the case in the FDP leadership in the mid-sixties as well as in the early eighties. At both times, the FDP feared that a continuation of the existing coalition would lead to its electoral defeat in the next election. Zülch reports that in 1966 the crisis of the Christian–Liberal coalition was triggered by severe losses of the FDP in two state elections and its following attempt to regain a more independent profile (1972: 24; cf. also Gringmuth 1984: 31ff).

Voter dissatisfaction did not, however, play any role in the dissolution of the Grand Coalition in 1969. Not only did nearly 80 per cent of the respondents declare in the 1969 pre-election survey that the Grand Coalition had been successful, but nearly 58 per cent wished its continuation after the election. The main reason lay, instead, entirely on the elite level. In a study carried out by Engelmann in 1969 in which parliamentarians, party activists and voters were interviewed, the author found that an overwhelming majority of 70 per cent of the elite respondents thought that the Grand Coalition was bad for democracy, whereas this was only true for 26 per cent of the mass sample (Engelmann 1972: 35ff). The data of our 1968 elite study confirm this. While 82 per cent of the elites said that the formation of the Grand Coalition had been justified under the political conditions of 1966, 64.9 per cent claimed that its continuation would be

of disadvantage to democracy. The most frequent arguments brought forward in an open-ended question were the lack of opposition (31.9 per cent) and the blurring of party differences (14.2 per cent).

In contrast to this, survey data for the early eighties[15] show that voter dissatisfaction again played an important role for the fate of the Social–Liberal government. Satisfaction with the government as measured on a scale ranging from +5 to −5 declined from a comfortable +1.2 in January 1981 to an unprecedented low of −0.4 in August 1982 (Berger *et al.* 1983: 563f). This was particularly marked among FDP voters (decline from +1.8 to +0.4), whereas SPD voters showed not only much more satisfaction with the government at both points in time, but also a smaller decline from +2.9 to +2.1.

Similarly, if we turn to the ratings of the individual parties, it can be seen that the SPD suffered a continuous decrease in popular sympathy after the 1980 election. At the turn of 1981/2 its values had dropped below +1.0. The FDP curve is of similar shape but the FDP values were nearly uniformly higher than those of the SPD. At the same time the values for the CDU fluctuated around +1.3 and showed a slight increase after April 1982 (Berger *et al.* 1983: 562).

The most important indicator of electoral support and the most relevant in terms of votes is, of course, the vote intention of the respondents. Repeated surveys show that the percentage of respondents expressing a vote intention for the SPD declined rapidly in the first half of 1982, while the FDP support remained rather stable.

The FDP leaders were well aware of the fact that the various indicators of support for the government and the governing parties pointed downwards. It was therefore rational on their side to assume that the decline would continue and that the FDP, too, would be affected by it sooner or later. Thus, the conclusion to leave the governmnent seems well justified.

A survey carried out on behalf of the FDP leadership in June/July 1981, which was designed to probe for the potential reactions of FDP voters to a coalitional change, demonstrates that the party leaders pursued exactly the same kind of reasoning. With an internal paper of the FDP, which was published by the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on 22 August, the development of government and party popularity was analysed, followed by a report on the results of the study. These results also constitute the data base of a more scholarly analysis by Gibowski (1981). They show that a majority (52 per cent) of the FDP voters advocated the general norm that a coalition should not be dissolved during a legislative term. Seventy-seven per cent of them wished the continuation of the Social–Liberal coalition until 1984. Asked for their coalitional preference, 56 per cent favoured the Social–Liberal government, and 27 per cent a Christian–Liberal one (cf. the slightly different values of Table 3.4).

The survey also included several questions probing for voter reactions under different political scenarios, assuming increasing difficulties in co-operation between the FDP and the SPD. The most pertinent question, however,

concerned the hypothetical vote intention in the event of the FDP declaring before the next election its intention to form a new coalition with the Christian Democrats. It resulted in an overall loss of about 10 per cent of the FDP voters, resulting from net losses of one-third and net gains of one-quarter. The title of the analysis indicates that this was deemed to be the central result of the survey: 'A coalitional statement [*Koalitionsaussage*] in favour of the Christian Democrats would not be fatal' (*Frankfurter Rundschau*). Even when Gibowski assumes that the prediction of losses is more realistic than that of potential gains (1981: 13f), the margin of FDP votes for the hypothetical question comes very close to the electoral return of the FDP in the 1983 Bundestag elections.

Thus, the FDP leadership was prepared to suffer again a considerable exchange in voters when it left the Schmidt government in September 1982. This was, by the way, shortly after the opinion poll in August 1982 which had yielded the above-mentioned most negative rating ever measured for a federal government (−0.4), and showed that the vote intention for the Christian Democrats had gone up to more than 50 per cent. The chance of an absolute majority of the CDU/CSU represented a particular danger for the FDP, since this would have deprived it of its pivotal role in the West German party system.

The FDP's expectation, however, that its stable voter basis exceeded the 5 per cent level was overly optimistic. Opinion polls after the formation of the Christian–Liberal government showed the FDP so far below the 5 per cent barrier that its return to the next Bundestag seemed doubtful (Berger *et al.* 1983: 574). This was mainly due to the way in which the old government had been toppled, which was criticised by 60 per cent of the voters (Berger *et al.* 1983: 567). It was only in January 1983 that the party regained the strength needed to secure its legislative survival.

The data in Table 3.5 show that among the non-political elites support for the parties of the Social–Liberal coalition was already rather low in spring 1981. This becomes particularly evident if we compare the elites to the general public at the same time. The much lower ratings of the elites, though partly due to the fact that the SPD generally enjoys much less support among the non-political elites than among voters,[16] remain even when we control for vote intention. This corroborates the presumption that political developments show themselves earlier in elite than in voter opinions (Wildenmann 1975: 278ff). Wildenmann concluded from these results as early as March 1982 that 'The elites wish the change' ('Die Elite wünscht den Wechsel').

(f) The change in 'coalitional climate' between 1972 and 1981/2

Changing mutual sympathy ratings of the political parties can serve as an indicator of changes in the relations between the parties. Unfortunately, no such question had been included in the 1968 elite study, which limits the analysis to the years between 1972 and 1981. Above, the sympathy ratings have already been

Table 3.5 *Mean sympathy ratings for SPD, CDU and FDP in the early eighties*

	SPD	CDU	FDP
Population[a]			
September 1980	+2.0	+1.1	+1.2
May 1981			
All respondents	+1.3	+1.3	+1.3
SPD voters	+3.5	−0.1	+1.7
CDU/CSU voters	−0.6	+3.4	+0.7
FDP voters	+1.6	+0.5	+3.7
April 1982	+0.6	+1.1	+0.9
August 1982	+0.3	+1.4	+0.2
October 1982	+1.2	+1.3	−0.8
March 1983	+1.2	+1.9	−0.2
Non-political elites, 1981			
All non-political elites	+0.1	+1.5	+0.7
SPD supporters	+2.8	−0.7	+0.3
CDU/CSU supporters	−1.5	+3.0	+0.1
FDP supporters	+0.2	+1.2	+2.7

[a] These survey results were made available by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Mannheim.

used as a supplementary measure of coalitional preferences for those elite respondents who had indicated a preference for a single-party government. In this section, however, the metric information yielded by the ratings will be used rather than the ordinal one.

Most authors describe the co-operation during the first years of the Social–Liberal government as harmonious (Gringmuth 1984: 9f; Haungs 1983: 102; Smith 1979: 145). This is also reflected in our data. The mutual ratings of SPD and FDP politicians are rather positive. At the same time, a high degree of polarisation between coalition and opposition parties can be seen.

During the second half of the 1970s, however, the co-operation in government became increasingly difficult. The replacement of the founders of the coalition, Willy Brandt and Walter Scheel, in the offices of Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor by Helmut Schmidt and Hans-Dietrich Genscher was presumably of more than just symbolic significance. Verheugen calls it the 'turning-point' (*Zäsur*) dividing two periods of Social–Liberal government (1984: 59). 'The above-mentioned personal turnover symbolized at the same time a change in coalitional climate: the vigorous spirit [*Aufbruchsstimmung*] of 1969 was superseded by a persistent disenchantment, a concentration on matters which seemed imperative in the light of the deteriorating economic conditions' (Haungs 1983: 102).

The sympathy ratings of the party leaders in 1981 reflect this change rather clearly. The SPD and FDP have drifted apart, while the CDU and FDP have moved closer. The FDP politicians give nearly equal ratings for SPD and CDU,

Table 3.6 *Mean sympathy ratings for the political parties, 1972 and 1981/2*

	Sympathy ratings for:			
	CDU	SPD	CSU	FDP
1972				
SPD politicians	−1.6	+3.7	−3.6	+2.4
CDU politicians	+3.1	−1.4	+1.7	−2.0
CSU politicians	+2.4	−2.0	+2.6	−1.7
FDP politicians	−1.9	+1.6	−3.6	+4.1
Non-political elites				
SPD supporters	−1.0	+2.7	−3.3	+1.9
CDU/CSU supporters	+2.3	−0.6	+0.9	−0.6
FDP supporters	−0.1	+1.1	−2.4	+3.0
Population				
SPD voters	−0.8	+4.0	−1.8	+1.8
CDU/CSU voters	+3.2	−0.2	+2.6	−0.3
FDP voters	+0.6	+2.4	−0.9	+3.2
1981/2				
SPD politicians	−1.1	+3.3	−3.0	+0.8
CDU politicians	+4.2	−2.2	+3.1	−0.7
CSU politicians	+3.8	−3.1	+4.5	−1.6
FDP politicians	+0.5	+0.4	−2.1	+4.2
Non-political elites				
SPD voters	−0.7	+2.8	−2.8	+0.3
CDU/CSU voters	+3.0	−1.5	+1.5	+0.1
FDP voters	+1.2	+0.2	−1.1	+2.7
Population				
SPD voters	−0.7	+3.3	−2.0	−0.4
CDU/CSU voters	+3.4	−1.3	+2.2	+1.1
FDP voters	+0.1	+1.2	−1.5	+2.7

though both are only slightly positive. Among the FDP supporters in the non-political elites, the CDU has even passed the SPD. CDU leaders and elite supporters rate the FDP less negatively than in 1972, though not (yet) positively. Remarkably enough, almost no rapprochement between the FDP and CSU has taken place: their mutual ratings are still far in the negative range. This hostility indicates the endemic conflict between these parties in the new government.

The results can be traced back to the avowedly strained climate within the Social–Liberal coalition in the summer of 1981. Already they show a trend among the FDP towards the Christian Democrats which was even more marked among the FDP elite supporters than among the FDP leaders themselves.

Dalton and Hildebrandt (1983), in analysing the development of distances between the voters of the three parties from 1961 to 1980, stress as a major result that the perceived polarisation between the SPD and Christian Democrats has increased considerably, whereas the distance between the SPD and the FDP has

decreased during this time. Our data supplement their analysis in an important way by allowing us to compare voter ratings to those of the elites. The average scores in Table 3.6 show clearly that the mutual evaluations among Christian Democrats on one side and Social Democrats on the other are more negative and, thus, more polarised among political elites than among party supporters in the non-political elites who, in turn, show more polarisation than the voters.

The growing polarisation found by Dalton and Hildebrandt can, therefore, also be interpreted as a reaction of the voters to the much higher degree of polarisation in the elites during the seventies. This possibility is, in fact, explicitly mentioned by the authors. Even more interesting, however, is their presumption that the polarisation among the voters may escape elite control and that elites cannot just switch it off whenever it becomes inconvenient (1983: 79).

This optimistic assumption may, however, overrate voters' abilities to form political attitudes independently from elite opinion leadership. Our analysis of the development of coalitional preferences supports instead the expectation that voters will again follow the elites' decisions. Only with regard to the FDP voters does the assumption seem justified that voter attitudes are more resistant to the moves of their party. In accord with their prevailing coalitional preference, they still rated the SPD higher than the CDU in 1982. But the FDP leadership tries to overcome this resistance by deliberately taking the risk of losing a part of its voters each time it changes sides, and so far its calculations have been fair enough to ensure its survival.

(g) Policy positions

The literature on political parties and coalitions differs with regard to the importance which is attributed to substantive policy positions as compared to the striving for power positions (Max Weber: *Ämterpatronage*) as a motive in politics. Notably, representatives of the economic theory of politics (Downs, etc.) have assumed that the latter is the primary goal of parties whereas the substantive policy positions are no more than a by-product of it.

The FDP has often been accused of being in the first instance oriented towards participation in government regardless of its programmatic profile. If this were true, policy agreements or differences should not play any role in its coalitional behaviour. Our data can show whether the shifting coalitional preferences of the FDP leaders and FDP supporters in the elites were also accompanied by increasing differences over policies in the recent Social–Liberal coalition.

The analysis will be limited to a comparison of the issue positions of elites between 1972 and 1981. The index scores in Table 3.7 were computed from a number of issue statements which the respondents had to rate according to their degree of approval/disapproval. The indices tap three distinct issue areas which have emerged as the main domains of political conflict between the parties in 1972: social policy, foreign policy and economic policy (Hoffmann-Lange *et al.*

Table 3.7 *Issue positions of elites in three issue areas, 1972 and 1981*

Political elite	*n*	Social policy	Foreign policy	Economic policy
		1972		
Political elite				
SPD	110	5.0	3.8	4.1
CDU/CSU	128	3.6	2.3	2.8
FDP	47	5.0	3.7	3.3
Non-political elites				
SPD supporters	456	4.9	3.9	3.9
CDU/CSU supporters	800	3.7	2.6	2.6
FDP supporters	203	4.4	3.4	3.1
		1981		
Political elite				
SPD	124	5.3	4.3	4.6
CDU/CSU	125	2.8	2.7	2.4
FDP	25	4.7	3.6	2.5
Non-political elites				
SPD supporters	318	4.8	4.2	4.2
CDU/CSU supporters	670	2.9	2.9	2.4
FDP supporters	214	3.7	3.6	2.6

1980: 55ff). Although the individual statements differed somewhat between 1972 and 1981, the indices should allow comparisons over time as long as the results are interpreted cautiously (cf. Hoffmann-Lange 1986).

In 1972, the elite attitudes showed clearly that the common basis of the Social–Liberal coalition lay in the fields of foreign policy (détente policy; Ostpolitik) and social policy (e.g. liberalisation of criminal law, introduction of comprehensive schools). In economic policy matters the FDP was instead somewhat closer to the Christian Democrats.

The basic pattern has not changed much in 1981, but some noticeable shifts have occurred. The FDP has moved even closer to the Christian Democrats in economic policy. The politicians of both parties occupy practically identical positions, while at the same time the polarisation between them and the Social Democrats has increased. In foreign policy, the FDP has moved into a position between the two big parties. By looking at the individual issue statements plus an additional question concerning a general evaluation of détente policy, one can characterise the FDP position as at the same time pro-American and in favour of détente policy. The Christian Democrats, instead, combine a pro-American stance with a more traditional anti-communism, while the Social Democrats favour détente policy and advocate somewhat more independence from US foreign policy. In social policy, finally, the FDP is still closer to the SPD in 1981.

These results correspond to those Niedermayer has found for party delegates, namely that there are two basic cleavage lines deeply rooted in the value orientations and organisational affiliations of FDP politicians (1982: 90ff). The

social reformism axis divides in our data, as well as in his, persons with and without religious affiliations and also corresponds closely to the number of postmaterialists. The economic conflict divides trade union members from non-members. Foreign policy attitudes constitute a third dimension which is, however, not rooted as deeply and handled more pragmatically.

Verheugen, as well as Norpoth (1982), gives similar characterisations of the basic cleavage structure in West Germany. Verheugen claims that agreement in economic and foreign policy constituted the basis of the Christian–Liberal coalition already from the beginning of the Federal Republic, whereas the FDP always had more in common with the SPD in the fields of interior, judicial and educational policy (1984: 29). This pattern changed during the second half of the sixties when the FDP started to advocate a more active policy towards Eastern Europe, which became the common basis of the Ostpolitik initiated together with the SPD.

Compared to our data, however, Norpoth (1982: 15f) tends to locate the FDP position too far to the right on economic policy and too far to the left on the dimension he labels 'Religion and Culture'. While this may be true for some issues on which the FDP takes particularly pronounced positions (e.g. welfare policy, immigration policy), it does not seem justified for the overall position of this party. Our data instead support the notion of the FDP as a centre party in all three issue areas, whose position oscillates between those of the two big parties. This is further confirmed by the self-placement of the respondents on the left–right scale. The FDP leaders place themselves right in the centre of the 10-point scale (5.3), whereas the SPD leaders have an average score of 3.8, and the CDU/CSU leaders 6.1.

The data on the issue positions of the party leaders show that the distance between the SPD and FDP increased between 1972 and 1981 in all three issue areas, but most markedly in questions of economic policy. On the other hand, the CDU/CSU–FDP distance diminished in economic and foreign policy, while it remained constant in the field of social policy.

Our data confirm therefore that an increased conflict over economic policy divided the parties of the Social–Liberal coalition in 1981. This conflict was also the main reason for the definite end of the coalition in 1982. Given the high salience attributed to economic matters at the beginning of the 1980s as compared to social policy and foreign policy, the coalitional change was justified on grounds of substantial policy differences.

This can be further substantiated by looking at the policy priorities of the respondents. The answers given to an open-ended question concerning the most important problems of the Federal Republic show that the high salience attributed to Ostpolitik and to educational policy in 1972 had given way to concerns about security policy, energy policy and employment policy in 1981 (cf. Hoffmann-Lange 1986).

Table 3.8 *Issue positions of FDP politicians and FDP supporters among non-political elites according to second rank in party rank order, 1981*

	For comparison:	First rank: FDP		For comparison:
	SPD politicians	Second rank: SPD	Second rank: CDU	CDU/CSU politicians
Social policy	5.3	4.5	3.5	2.8
Foreign policy	4.3	4.0	3.4	2.7
Economic policy	4.6	3.0	2.3	2.4

The role policy questions played in the final stage of the Social–Liberal government can also be explored by looking for systematic policy differences within the FDP. This was done by breaking FDP respondents down by the party they had ranked second in sympathy. Since the number of FDP leaders interviewed ($n = 25$) was too small to allow a further subdivision, they were analysed together with the FDP supporters in the non-political elites. The analysis revealed clear differences in the expected direction as the values in Table 3.8 show. These results again closely parallel those of Niedermayer, who found similar differences (1982: 109).

(h) Conclusion

The analysis has shown that coalitional decisions are mainly elite decisions. The results indicate that voters only react to these decisions, either by changing their opinions in the same direction or by deserting the party. Whereas the first reaction is more typical for the voters of the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, the latter is more frequent among FDP voters.

The fact that party supporters in the non-political elites have been found to be more in agreement with the party leaders than voters can be traced back to two different reasons. The first is that they are more aware of the political changes going on within the political parties, and therefore react earlier to them than ordinary voters. Another and more likely explanation is that they are themselves involved in the opinion formation process which precedes the decision-making of the political parties. This should be particularly true for the media elites and the big pressure groups. These groups did not, however, differ much from the other party supporters in the non-political elites in their coalitional preferences, and are, hence, not ahead of the other elites. One important exception has to be noted, however. The supporters of the FDP in the business elite have never favoured the Social–Liberal coalition to the same extent as the other FDP supporters, let alone the FDP leaders themselves. In 1982, they were the most active promoters of the formation of the current Christian–Liberal government. Attempts to influence the intra-party balance by giving financial support to members of the

(economically) conservative party wing are particularly noticeable in this respect (Verheugen 1984: 131). Some of the details of this practice were revealed during the continuing investigations concerning illegal donations to the parties by business corporations and individual businessmen (*Parteispendenaffäre*).

The change in coalition was accompanied, in 1969 as well as in 1982, by changes in the sympathy ratings for the parties by elites and voters. In 1981/2 the same was true for issue attitudes. Given the centre position of the FDP, which on one of the major cleavage lines, i.e. social policy, is closer to the SPD while it is closer to the CDU/CSU in economic policy, it seems natural that a change in coalition reflects more a change in policy priorities than in substantive policy positions. But the data revealed that shifts in the latter have taken place, too, thus driving the FDP nearer to the Christian Democrats for two reasons.

While the results have shown that elites take a more active part in coalition formation than voters, this does not mean that they are unresponsive to public demands. The FDP reactions to the decline in support for the Social–Liberal coalition in 1982 have demonstrated this rather forcefully.

Notes

1. There are formally two independent Christian Democratic parties, the CDU and its Bavarian 'sister party', the CSU (Christian Social Union). Though both differ somewhat in organisational structure and ideological appeal, it seems justified to treat them as a single party, particularly since they do not compete for votes. The CSU is limited to Bavaria where the CDU, in turn, has no regional party organisation.
2. The Grand Coalition between CDU/CSU and SPD is sometimes called Great Coalition, e.g. by Engelmann (1972) and Merkl (1970), but the term Grand Coalition is more common and will therefore be used here.
3. There is agreement in the literature to regard the time of the Grand Coalition as a transitional period ('interlude') between the Christian–Liberal and the Social–Liberal period. Cf. Haungs 1983: 99f; Norpoth 1982: 13.
4. Norpoth (1982: 13ff) distinguishes four independent though related issue dimensions on which the FDP assumes different positions *vis-à-vis* the two bigger parties. Though not implausible in many respects, his analytic approach is highly impressionistic.
5. Thus, the question of which government coalition will be formed does not normally play a role in coalition negotiations. Instead, these are mainly concerned with policy questions (*Regierungsprogramm*) and the distribution of portfolios among the parties. Cf. Smith 1979; Norpoth 1982: 19.
6. Even if we assume that co-operation and not confrontation prevails in a government coalition, policy differences continue to exist, and can be traced back to different programmatic outlooks. In a Christian–Liberal coalition, the FDP assumes the role of a 'liberal corrective' (*liberales Korrektiv*) with regard to the law and order policy advocated by the Christian Democrats, while it plays a retarding role (*Bremser*) with regard to Social Democratic state interventionist policies in a Social–Liberal coalition. Cf. Norpoth 1982: 13; Smith 1979: 145.
7. The studies were conducted by research teams at the University of Mannheim. Principal investigator was Rudolf Wildenmann (1972, together with Werner Kaltefleiter, University of Kiel, and 1981, together with Max Kaase, University of Mannheim).

   Machine-readable codebooks which also include an outline of the study designs are available at the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung, Cologne. Elite Survey 1968, ZA No. 1138; Elite Survey 1972, ZA No. 0796; Elite Survey 1981, ZA No. 1139.
8. These studies are also documented in machine-readable codebooks: Pre-election study 1969, ZA No. 0426; Pre-election study 1972, ZA No. 0635.

9. One exception is the general population survey, 1982, where more than 30% of the respondents did not indicate a preference for one of the coalitions on the list. The main reason for this may be that this study was carried out at a time when no election was imminent: hence, it also had a much higher number of respondents (26.3%) who did not even indicate a vote intention. An additional 6.7% wanted to vote for the Greens or other parties instead of the three 'established' parties. Of these, altogether 728 respondents, only 28.7%, indicated a preference for one of the coalitions on the list.
10. In the 1972 pre-election study respondents with a preference for a single-party government (cf. Table 3.3) were further probed to indicate their coalitional preference if such a government should not be feasible. Norpoth reports the distribution for the latter question.
11. According to the West German electoral law each voter has two votes. The second one is cast for a party list while the first one is for the constituency candidate. With the first votes, candidates are elected directly by simple plurality rule. These direct seats won by a party are, however, subtracted from the overall number of seats this party has won in terms of second votes: i.e. the distribution of seats in the Bundestag is ultimately determined by the second votes. Records about split-ticket voting are part of the representative voting statistics of the Federal Bureau of Census (Statistisches Bundesamt) which collects information about voting behaviour according to age cohorts and gender in a representative sample of constituencies.
12. This is, however, at least partly also the result of a secular decline of the FDP in state elections since the 1970s for which no convincing explanation has so far been brought forward.
13. In the elite surveys of 1968 and 1972, respondents were not asked for their vote intention. Party support was instead measured as the first rank in a rank order of the parties according to sympathy.
14. I am well aware of the fact that the attitudes of the media elites are not an adequate indicator of mass media coverage, which would have required content analyses. But, nevertheless, the changes which occurred among the media elites should at least partly reflect what was going on at the mass media level.
15. Source: regular surveys of the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Mannheim. *I am greatly indebted to* Wolfgang G. Gibowski for having made unpublished figures available.
16. In all three elite surveys, no more than one-third of the non-political elites indicated a preference for the Social Democratic party, though with marked differences between elite sectors. Social Democrats are particularly weak among business elites and particularly strong among trade union elites.

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