

Don't Think Twice, It's Alright

SPD-Left Party/PDS Coalitions in the
Eastern German Länder

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Introduction

During the run-up to the 1998 federal election, there was intense speculation on how—should it be elected—Germany's first ever red-green national administration would fare. Once the votes had been cast and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens had indeed come out on top, some argued that the experiences of red-green coalitions at the Land-level could be useful in mapping out both prospective and likely success stories for a red-green coalition at the federal level. Taking to heart Lawrence Dodd's famous proposition that "provincial or state parliaments could provide an experimental setting in which party coalitions could be attempted ... with the intermediate provincial experience making national-level coalitions more possible than they would be without the provincial experience,"¹ political scientists and journalists alike attempted to delineate the elements of successful and unsuccessful red-green coalitions at the Land level in order to understand more about the formation and maintenance of this first national SPD-Green government. One of the most well known of these subsequent attempts is Charles Lees's book *The Red-Green Coalition in Germany*.² Lees outlines a red-green "model" of government based on the experiences of red-green coalitions at the Land level, attempting to illustrate how the formation of red-green at the federal level followed the same basic pattern.

In many ways, the historical development of the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)³ has seemed to parallel that of the Greens. Both were initially shunned by the established parties, and both—to a certain extent—embraced their “outsider” status. Each soon found itself with considerable political influence, however, as possible coalition partners for the Social Democrats. Yet, both the Greens—especially during the 1980s—and the Left Party/PDS found themselves torn between the role of principled opposition and responsible party of government across and within different Land party organizations.⁴ Consequently, the Left Party/PDS has entered into coalitions with the SPD in two Länder, but with significant hesitation and with mixed results. What lessons the party draws from its experiences in these coalitions at the Land level undoubtedly will enter into its coalition calculus in other Länder in the future—arguably, it already has. And should a coalition with the SPD at the federal level ever become a real possibility, experiences from the states will be instructive for the Left Party/PDS, just as they were for the Greens.

In this article, we investigate whether a red-red model of government at the Land level exists, and, if so, what the elements of such a model are. In the first section of the paper, we briefly outline what coalition theory tells us about the dynamics of coalition formation. Then, using Lees’s red-green model as a guide, we offer two models of red-red coalitions, the first dealing with coalition formation and the second with coalition maintenance. In the next section, we lay out the evidence for this model with data gained from the only two red-red coalitions: the recently terminated coalition in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, abbreviated here as MV) and the current coalition in Berlin, as well as with data drawn from an example of a “thwarted” SPD-Left Party/PDS coalition (i.e., a coalition that was mathematically possible) in the Land of Brandenburg. It should perhaps go without saying, of course, that we have conceptualized our theoretical model of red-red government *µ*more as a heuristic than predictive tool. With such a small data set (all mathematically possible red-red coalitions) and positive cases within that set (existing red-red coalitions) it could hardly be otherwise. Nevertheless, with this model of red-red government we hope to stimulate further discussion on what makes red-red coalitions possible and viable, and how long we should expect them to survive.

Red-Green and Red-Red Models of Government

In essence, coalition theory can be divided into three issue areas that have their own distinct logic and sets of dynamics: the study of coalition formation, the study of coalition maintenance, and the study of coalition termination. All of these areas have traditionally been dominated by rational choice approaches to understanding political behavior that have tended to invoke game-theoretical models in attempting to understand more about how coalitions come into existence, are maintained and eventually collapse.⁵ Coalition formation in particular is seen as forcing parties to bargain with each other, prompting clear “winners” and “losers,” and can therefore best be understood by creating models based on sets of assumptions that the actors involved are perceived to hold.⁶

There are, however, major problems with the traditional variants of formal coalition theory. For one thing, they are remarkably poor at predicting real-world coalition outcomes.⁷ Related to this are methodological critiques that question the entire relationship between “new” theories and the same, somewhat limited dataset. These important caveats aside, it is nevertheless clear that both office seeking and policy seeking motivations are important in explaining how coalitions come into being. Out of this synthesis has come the notion that parties seek “minimal connected winning” coalitions. Yet, although most scholars believe that the “minimal connected winning” model of coalition formation has a great deal of validity, it has been criticized amongst other things for more or less wholly ignoring context. There are institutional constraints on coalition formation—some linked, for example, to the electoral system or the history of relationships between parties—which could preclude coalition formation between parties, even if such a coalition were mathematically possible and ideologically opportune. There are also regional/national political cultures that can immediately black-ball theoretically attractive coalition options. Consequently, rational-choice-inspired elements of coalition formation have frequently been supplemented with factors that attempt to capture these kinds of path-dependent particularities.⁸

The vast majority of this research has been conducted, perhaps understandably, with the national level of party political competition

in mind. The one major exception to this is William Downs's excellent contribution that explicitly investigated how coalitions worked at the subnational level across Belgium, France and Germany.⁹ He uses measures such as the volatility of subnational election results over time and the deviation of subnational election results from national ones (what he terms "localization"), as well as survey data to test a number of hypotheses regarding which coalitions come into existence and when, how long they tend to last, and why they might conceivably fail. Importantly, Downs concludes that much more effort needs to be made to overcome the prevailing notion that parties in Germany are still unitary actors and that the Land level is an important, significant and under-researched level of analysis.¹⁰

Downs's call to arms has become even more relevant in recent years. His very thorough research was conducted in the mid 1990s before the Left Party/PDS had entered any Land coalition governments and before the processes of regionalization in the German party system genuinely had taken root.¹¹ Given that the subnational level can generate important insights into how complex parties work and also guidance as to how future national politics may (theoretically) function, any analysis of the Left Party/PDS's position in the coalition equation is more than overdue.

Our attempt to do just this draws on Charles Lees's work on red-green coalitions. Lees's model of red-green cooperation has three different components with three sub-components for each factor. Yet, at base, it reflects two of the three different aspects of coalition theory—coalition formation and coalition maintenance. In essence, this means that Lees has two models of red-green cooperation: the first outlining the factors essential to the successful formation of red-green governments and the second outlining the factors essential to successful maintenance. With regard to the former, his model includes five factors: ideological distance/policy divergence, office seeking payoff for the SPD, the SPD's relationship with possible coalition partners other than the Greens, inter-party conflict within the SPD and Greens, and intra-party conflict between the two parties. In terms of coalition maintenance, Lees's model includes policy divergence (or "policy friction") between the two parties, cabinet satisfaction ("qualitative" as well as "quantitative") for both parties, effective policy making for the Greens' client groups, effective staffing of the

civil service for the Greens, inter-party conflict within the SPD and Greens, and finally intra-party conflict within the two parties—both of these last two factors, it should be noted, can hamper substantive policy-making as well as the public image of the coalition.

In adapting Lees's models as a guide to constructing red-red models of coalition formation and maintenance, we have largely retained the same factors, but have made a few significant changes. First, a coalition formation model applicable to red-red coalitions should reflect the different party system dynamics at work in eastern Germany. In particular, we factor in the presence or absence of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Greens at the time of coalition negotiations. In the absence of either or both parties (more the rule than the exception), the SPD is left with drastically reduced coalition options, thus increasing the odds that the SPD will go into a coalition with the Left Party/PDS. Second, our coalition formation model takes into account the electoral strength of the coalition partners over time. Concretely, this means that we believe that when the SPD has increased its vote and seat shares from the previous Land election—a development that almost invariably involves a decrease for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—the SPD will be more favorably disposed towards a coalition with the Left Party/PDS. When, on the other hand, its vote and seat shares go down, the SPD is much more inclined to go into a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats, regardless of total percentage of the vote. The logic for this is simple. All things (especially ideological distance and intra/inter-party relationships) being equal, the SPD will only want to deal with the Left Party/PDS if it is able to dictate the rules of the coalition game. If the Left Party/PDS is too strong electorally, it is likely to force compromises on the SPD that the party's right-wing is unlikely to accept without real rancor setting in. This dynamic will also ensure that the SPD is in a much stronger position to dictate which ministries it controls and therefore to placate its key client groups. Finally, in our red-red coalition maintenance model, there also needs to be some recognition that effective policy-making for client groups of the Left Party/PDS is significant, while the staffing of civil service positions could be subsumed under this category of "effective policy making." Thus, our coalition maintenance model has five categories rather than Lees's six. Within these models, we hypothesized that there are

optimum or “ideal” conditions that would, on the one hand, favor the formation of a red-red coalition, and, on the other, the successful maintenance of a red-red coalition. These models are depicted in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Factors Determining the Likelihood of Red-Red Coalition Formation

	Ideological Distance or Policy Divergence Between SPD and Left Party/PDS Before Coalition Negotiations	Office-Seeking Payoff for SPD in Red-Red	The SPD's Relationship with Other Possible Coalition Partners at Time of Negotiations	Presence of Greens?	Presence of FDP?	Increase for the SPD from Previous Election?	Intra-Party Conflict Between SPD and Left Party/PDS at Time of Negotiations	Inter-Party Conflict Within SPD and Left Party/PDS at Time of Negotiations
Ideal Case for Red-Red	Low	High	Poor	No	No	Yes	Low	Low

Table 2: Factors Determining the Successful Maintenance of Red-Red Coalitions

	Policy Divergence/ Policy Friction Between SPD and Left Party/ PDS	Cabinet Satisfaction for Both Parties	Effective Policy-Making for Left Party/PDS's Client Groups	Intra-Party Conflict Between SPD and Left Party/PDS	Inter-Party Conflict Within SPD and Left Party/PDS
Ideal Case for Red-Red	Low	High	High	Low	Low

In the next section, we seek to test the cogency of these models against the experiences of red-red coalitions in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Berlin, as well as against the experiences of the SPD-Left Party/PDS relationship in Brandenburg—a state where a red-red coalition, mathematically possible in 2004, nevertheless failed to come to fruition. Obviously, in our red-red coalition maintenance model, we only have two cases—MV and Berlin—rather than the three found in the coalition formation model. One should also note that we chose Brandenburg for the specific reason that after 1999, it was the only state where a red-red coalition led by the SPD could mathematically have been created. The SPD's share of the vote remained behind that of the Left Party/PDS in both Saxony—where the CDU has always enjoyed an overall majority—and Thuringia, where the SPD has not beaten the Left Party/PDS in terms of vote share since 1994. Furthermore, in Saxony-Anhalt the Left Party/PDS also polled (fractionally) more votes than the SPD in 2002.¹² This factor alone

ensured that the SPD would not seek to enter coalitions with the post-communists under any circumstances.

The Left Party/PDS in Red-Red Coalitions in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Berlin

Mecklenburg-West Pomerania

Coalition politics in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has been shaped by a three party system that until recently left the SPD with only two coalition options: red-red or a grand coalition. From 1994-2006, however, the latter option was always much less attractive because of strained relations between the party organizations over policy issues, as well as over the “anticommunist” consensus after unification, and strained personal relations between the leader of the SPD-MV, Harald Ringstorff, and the leaders of the CDU-MV, Bernd Seite (1990-98) and Eckhardt Rehberg (1998-2002). Although Ringstorff was clearly in favor of a red-red coalition in MV as far back as 1994, disapproval from the national SPD (and some resistance within the SPD-MV) resulted in a grand coalition between the CDU and SPD from 1994-1998.¹³

After the 1998 election, however, the SPD emerged as the strongest party, while the Left Party/PDS showed impressive electoral gains. Per its pre-election stand, the Social Democrats announced that they would begin initial coalition talks with both the CDU and Left Party/PDS. Yet, given the bad blood between the CDU-MV and SPD-MV, a grand coalition was highly improbable from the very beginning, and initial talks between the two parties soon revealed substantial policy differences.¹⁴ Moreover, in contrast to the situation in 1994, internal resistance within the SPD-MV to a coalition with the Left Party/PDS was confined to small (albeit vocal) groups within the party. Although many continued to be wary of red-red, it was clearly preferred over a continuation of the grand coalition, and Ringstorff received strong backing at a party congress after the election for the former coalition option. In initial discussions between the SPD and Left Party/PDS, the two parties found agreement on a number of issues, such as the refusal to use state monies to finance the new high-speed train (the so-called Transrapide), the lowering of the

voting age to sixteen for local and communal elections, and the need for some new state-sector employment programs. To be sure, there were also conflict areas as well, chief among them questions of funding for a publicly subsidized job sector (ÖBS) and questions about reforming the educational system at the primary school level through the introduction of the so-called “Orientation Phase” from the fourth to sixth grades. At the end of the two-week coalition negotiations between the two parties, however, the Left Party/PDS compromised considerably on its “minimum requirements” (Mindestanforderungen) for governmental participation, which had been worked out by a special commission of the Land party leadership in March 1998. The SPD subsequently received eight cabinet positions in the new government (including Minister President Ringstorff as Justice Minister and former party challenger Rolf Eggert as Economics Minister) while the Left Party/PDS received the Social Ministry (Martina Bunge), the Environmental Ministry (Wolfgang Methling), and the Labor and Building Ministry (then-party chief Holter).

The coalition initially worked well, passing, amongst other things, a new law lowering the voting age in local/communal elections to sixteen, a change in the regulations concerning background checks of parliamentarians by the Gauck Commission (an official body that investigates individuals’ Stasi past during the communist period)—both ideas put forward by the Left Party/PDS—and, most controversially, agreeing on yearly budgets that sharply curtailed government spending. Especially contentious were cuts affecting old age homes and family educational benefits (Erziehungsgeld), as well as a freeze on spending increases on state monies for the blind and handicapped. More serious to the coalition’s stability was the dispute that erupted between the two parties over Germany’s participation in military action during the Kosovo war, as well as disputes involving voting in the Bundesrat. While the SPD-MV firmly backed Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s position on the war, various Left Party/PDS legislators and party activists denounced NATO military involvement. Tensions between the two parties reached their highest point in 2001 when Ringstorff, representing Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in the Bundesrat during a discussion and vote on a new law on pension reform, cast a vote for the new law despite opposition from his

coalition partner and in violation of the 1998 Coalition Agreement guaranteeing the Land's abstention when the two coalition partners could not agree. The Left Party/PDS was furious, and calls to leave the coalition were frequent and shrill. Nevertheless, Helmut Holter and other leaders argued that leaving the coalition would ultimately hurt, rather than help, the party, while for his part Ringstorff offered an apology for his actions and promised to consult his coalition partner on all future Bundesrat votes.

Left Party/PDS governmental participation, however, had clear consequences for the party at the next Land election in September 2002. While the SPD was able to increase its share of the vote by 6.3 percent to 40.6 percent, the Left Party/PDS was only able to garner 16.4 percent, down a substantial 8 percent from its 1998 result. Consequently, the Left Party/PDS returned to the coalition government in 2002 chastened. The new coalition agreement between the two parties did not contain much that was new. The two parties failed to agree on several substantive items, such as a reintroduction of the wealth tax (*Vermögenssteuer*), more money for local governments, or an expansion of the *ÖBS* program.¹⁵ Still, the party was able to persuade the SPD not to set a ceiling on future new debt and, given the crisis that emerged in 2001, committed both parties to a strict interpretation of voting procedures in the Bundesrat.¹⁶ Red-red government in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania from 2002 to 2006 was remarkably uneventful and the two parties continued to work together well. Indeed, had it not been for the SPD's substantial losses in the 2006 state election—resulting in only a one-vote majority for the continuation of red-red—and subsequent pressure on Ringstorff by his own party to reach some kind of accommodation with a much more electorally powerful CDU, red-red undoubtedly would have gone on to another term in office.¹⁷

When looking at the red-red coalition in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania from 1998-2006 then, three things stand out. First, the coalition came to power because several conditions were present. These included a lack of coalition options for the SPD (the FDP and Greens have been absent from the Landtag since 1994); a very bad relationship between the CDU and SPD, thus precluding the possibility of a new grand coalition; a relatively small ideological range in some important policy domains such as the role of the state in the

economy between the SPD and Left Party/PDS; and a corresponding selective emphasis on policy agreements such as budget discipline and a de-emphasis on policy disagreements. This later point is indicative of the cordial relations that the party leaderships had built up in the pre-coalition period and of the culture of compromise and constructive engagement that had come to exist. Generally speaking, the two parties worked productively on a number of common policies and whenever disagreements arose, both partners generally either tried to find compromises—as has happened with education reform—or simply avoided the issue, for example the Kosovo war (not a Land-level competence in any case). Second, a certain degree of internal discord has always been evident within the Left Party/PDS-MV. Although the level of inter-party conflict is not dissimilar to that found in some other Länder, such as Brandenburg and Saxony-Anhalt (and much lower than in conflict-ridden Saxony), it is higher than that in Berlin, the only other Land where the Left Party/PDS is in government. Indeed, the dominant figure for the party in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Helmut Holter, has not been able to simply impose his own policy preferences on other members of the party leadership. Nor, for that matter, has the rank and file been prepared to sit back and let the leadership do more or less as it pleases, as frequently happens in Berlin.¹⁸ Third, policy content appears to play a much more significant role for both grassroots and leadership in MV. The rank and file follows the work of Left Party/PDS ministers closely and is not scared to articulate its dissatisfaction with the behavior of the party leadership.¹⁹ The fact that the Left Party/PDS-MV has suffered electorally, not just in traditional second order polls such as those to the European Parliament and local councils, but also in the rather more significant state and federal elections, has assisted those making critical assessments of the party's performance in office to find their voice in public.²⁰

Berlin

In Berlin meanwhile, the leadership of the Left Party/PDS has had a much freer hand and the party set government participation as a goal early on.²¹ Nevertheless, it was only in 2001 that it entered a Land election campaign with great hopes to be a potential party of government. The reason for this was the dramatic change in Berlin politics

resulting from a financial scandal that implicated the CDU parliamentary group leader Klaus Landowsky in the shady dealings of the Berlin Hypo Bank. However, the increasingly difficult financial position in which Berlin found itself had prompted the Berlin Left Party/PDS to adopt increasingly practical positions long before 2001. Thus, although the extent and scale of the crisis only became evident when the banking scandal broke, the structural weaknesses of Berlin's economy and ever increasing levels of post-unification debt offered clear pointers to economic difficulties well before the full scale of the crisis was known. The Left Party/PDS in Berlin confronted its own membership with an unpopular policy agenda for coming to terms with these structural problems as early as 1997. The political emergency program (reformpolitisches Sofortprogramm) that the leadership presented to members at the 1997 Land party congress shocked many delegates with its demands for a reduction in weekly working hours in the public services and a commensurate drop in wages.²² Although some among the rank and file articulated considerable horror at the thought of a socialist party adopting such capitalist policies, the membership nonetheless supported the leadership at the conference, and the Communist Platform ultimately remained isolated in its (unambiguous) rejection of the policy program.²³

On election night 2001, the Left Party/PDS was rewarded with its highest vote ever in a Berlin election. For its part, the SPD, as the clear winner of the election, had three coalition options: a "traffic light" coalition with the Greens and FDP, a coalition with the Left Party/PDS alone, or a coalition with both the Greens and Left Party/PDS (a grand coalition had been ruled out by the SPD before the election and the CDU's election losses made this rather unlikely in any event). Initially SPD-Berlin leader Klaus Wowereit indicated a preference for the "traffic light" option, a coalition option also preferred by the federal SPD. This was not entirely popular within the Berlin-SPD because this coalition option would have given the SPD-led coalition only a tiny majority (two seats over the opposition) in contrast to the other options (twenty seats more for red-red-green; six seats more for red-red). Be that as it may, coalition negotiations between the SPD, Greens, and FDP soon broke down on account of huge policy differences—budget issues, transport, housing, and even cultural policy—between the Greens and FDP. The SPD blamed both

parties for the breakdown of negotiations and indicated that it would be hard-pressed to reconsider a coalition with the Greens, considering them too obstinate and difficult to work with.²⁴

Negotiations began between the SPD and Left Party/PDS, going much smoother and faster than the previous talks between the SPD and the other parties, and the coalition negotiations were completed in two weeks. The subsequent coalition agreement reached between the SPD and Left Party/PDS was a lengthy document—over one hundred pages. Yet, despite the length many policy proposals were left vague with the simple comment that specific points would be “negotiated later” or “reviewed” by the two parties. Some other areas were more specific and therefore more controversial. For example, the agreement outlined a goal to eliminate Berlin’s indebtedness (with the exception of debts previously accumulated) by the year 2009. In terms of cabinet seat “payoffs” meanwhile, the Left Party/PDS was given three ministries and the SPD five. Gregor Gysi became Economics Minister (and deputy governing mayor). Although this looked like a high price to pay for the SPD (despite the fact that Gysi was immensely popular), the Social Democrats retained the finance portfolio. Moreover, given the condition of the budget, the Economics Ministry was as much poison pill as reward, assuring that the Left Party/PDS would share responsibility for unpopular budget decisions.

Given the situation of the budget and the entrance into government in Berlin by the Left Party/PDS for the first time, a drop in public support was to be expected. However, this came rather quickly. A mere six months after the coalition took office, an Emnid poll found that support for the government had fallen from 52 percent in October 2001 to 47 percent in July 2002. Almost all of the decrease in support came at the expense of the Left Party/PDS, which fell from its election vote of 22.6 percent to 16 percent.²⁵ Things became even worse for the party in the federal election held in September 2002. The failure of the Left Party/PDS to clear the 5 percent barrier could almost certainly be traced, at least in some form, to its disappointing electoral performance in those states where it governed. To illustrate, in Berlin, the Left Party/PDS’s share of the vote fell to 11.4 percent, almost halving its vote total from the 2001 Berlin election. As in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, opinion polls conducted shortly

after the federal election in Berlin suggested that the Left Party/PDS lost support among voters deeply disappointed by the party's belt-tightening policies in the coalition government—as well as disappointment with Gregor Gysi's abrupt departure from office and withdrawal from public life at the end of July 2002 in the wake of a small scandal. Despite these facts, there were no substantial policy changes on the part of the coalition partners. Both parties continued to cleave to their basic course in support of deep budget cuts. In the September 2006 state election, however, the Left Party/PDS suffered a further loss of some 9.2 percent of the vote, finishing with 13.4 percent. The SPD, meanwhile, gained 1.1 percent over its previous state election result. Although many believed that a rebellious WASG (Wahlalternative Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit) party organization in Berlin was responsible for the Left Party/PDS's losses, the latter lost only a marginal number of votes to the former—some 16,000. Clearly, however, the PDS in Berlin had been punished by the voters. And yet the party's election result, while hardly encouraging, was far from devastating, and despite increasing calls from some quarters for it to go back into opposition, the leadership actively sought to continue the red-red experiment. For its part, the SPD once again spurned the Green Party in coalition negotiations, opting to continue a coalition with a dependable (and somewhat humbled) coalition partner.

There are three important things to note about the events leading to the red-red government in Berlin and in its performance in its first term in office. First, although a grand coalition in 2001 was ruled out as a result of the banking scandal and the extent of the CDU's subsequent electoral losses, the SPD in Berlin (in contrast to Mecklenburg-West Pomerania) did have coalition options. In fact, its preference was for a coalition without the Left Party/PDS. But these theoretical options proved practically impossible in light of the hostility between the FDP and Greens. In light of the SPD's historically difficult relationship with the Greens and its often tense relationship with the FDP, this is perhaps not a surprise. Moreover, the generally good relations between the SPD and Left Party/PDS—exemplified by the quick coalition negotiations—clearly made red-red the most attractive option for the Social Democrats. Second, both the SPD (once negotiations with the FDP and Greens collapsed) and Left Party/PDS encoun-

tered little inter-party conflict in opting for this coalition. The Berlin Left Party/ PDS leadership strove actively for red-red and encountered little resistance from the party base. In contrast to MV, where the base of the party (and even some within the parliamentary group) had expressed some displeasure concerning the coalition and had stated that red-red could not continue at any price, the Left Party/PDS in Berlin seems to have been able to enter into a coalition and carry out its policies without much protest from the grassroots. Third, the Left Party/PDS's prioritization of fiscal discipline over expansive government (in the name of "socialism," of course) made coalition negotiations relatively easy, for both parties recognized that the dire financial position of Berlin would determine the limits of government spending in the city. Because of this, however, it cannot be said that the Left Party/PDS has been a tremendously effective advocate for its client groups. The party in Berlin—indeed, many in the party outside of Berlin—has made the argument that spending cuts would have been worse under a grand coalition. Thus, the Left Party/PDS has "protected" its client groups such as students, city workers, and others from the (hypothetically-worse) policies of others. Although some of the Left Party/PDS's voters clearly rejected that argument, it continued to hold some sway over party activists who followed the leadership's call to continue the red-red coalition.

The Case of the Missing Coalition: The Left Party/ PDS in Opposition in Brandenburg

Similar to Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, in Brandenburg, the possibility of red-red coalitions has been conditioned by the shifting fortunes of the SPD and CDU and the absence of the Greens and FDP since the 1994 Land election. During the early and mid-1990s Brandenburg was governed by the SPD alone with its popular Minister President Manfred Stolpe. Until 1994, the Left Party/PDS was granted—by virtue of the so-called consensual "Brandenburg Way"—a considerable consultative voice in policy areas ranging from school reform to creating the Land constitution. Even after the SPD gained an overall majority after 1994, informal contacts between the Social Democrats and Left Party/PDS remained plentiful—largely

through the activities of the party's most influential behind-the-scenes wheeler-dealer and chief whip Heinz Vietze.²⁶ The creation of a grand coalition between the SPD and CDU in 1999 changed this. Against the backdrop of the SPD's improving relations with the CDU and its worsening relations with the Left Party/PDS, the party slipped further and further away from the corridors of power, prompting the leader of the parliamentary party, Lothar Bisky, and the deputy leader of the Landesverband, Kornelia Wehlan, to declare in 1999 that the "Brandenburg Way" was dead. The Left Party/PDS was not a governmental partner in waiting, according to Bisky and Wehlan, as if it took on this role it would simply be used by the SPD as a blackmail tool with which to influence the CDU.²⁷ The clear loss of influence accompanied increasing tensions within the party itself. In spite of (or maybe even because of) its increasing isolation and internal heterogeneity, the Left Party/PDS went from one election victory to the next, culminating in its most successful electoral performance to date, when it polled 28 percent of the vote in the 2004 Land election.

In terms of attitudes towards participating in government, the Brandenburg Left Party/PDS originally adopted a highly pragmatic position. As early as 1997, a party conference resolution was agreed recommending that the Left Party/ PDS seek to join a coalition government with the SPD or, at the very least, tolerate an SPD minority administration.²⁸ Even prior to this, the leadership published an open letter to the SPD stating its intention to work closely with it to form such a coalition.²⁹ After 1997, however, schisms slowly developed between the membership, the parliamentary party, and other party employees, largely centering on personality clashes rather any sort of major disagreement over policy content. Rather than concentrate on entering government, the Left Party/PDS began to concentrate on vote maximization strategies and this led in 1998 to the ousting of its leader, Wolfgang Thiel, who had advocated strongly for participation in government.

In addition, a generational conflict has come into play. In particular, the younger members of the parliamentary party, grouped principally around Dagmar Enkelmann, were articulating markedly skeptical opinions on government participation as early as 2000 and strongly favored a strictly oppositional course. This clashed significantly

with the much more conciliatory course proposed by Bisky and Vietze, who continued to seek contacts with the SPD.³⁰ Thiel's successor as leader, Anita Tack, remained unable to genuinely fit into either category and so became ever more isolated, prompting Ralf Christoffers, a close friend of Bisky and Vietze, to take over the position in 2001.

The clear dominance of the pragmatist faction around Christoffers did not last until the Land election in 2004 and the nearer election day came, the more that old lines of conflict—particularly within the parliamentary party—began to reappear. Enkelmann, having returned from the federal political arena to the Brandenburg stage, publicly criticized Christoffers and went on record as wishing that “the Left Party/PDS would gain more of an oppositional profile.”³¹ The decision to put forward Enkelmann as the party's front-runner (Spitzenkandidatin) had a considerable impact on the basic orientation of the election campaign—as did national dissatisfaction with the Hartz IV labor market reform laws. Suddenly, the Left Party/PDS found itself in a position where it no longer had to fear going to the polls. The party realized that it could conduct a vociferous election campaign against a clear set of national policies without having to present anything too concrete in return. In this context, Enkelmann was a clear compromise candidate who did not (yet) challenge the positions of power eked out by the likes of Bisky, Vietze and Christoffers. Nonetheless, Enkelmann illustrated her less-than-overflowing enthusiasm for government participation by observing that “the fact that we are the strongest party in the opinion polls in no way compels us to form the next government.”³²

Campaign slogans such as “Hartz VI—Armut per Gesetz!” (Hartz VI—Poverty by Decree) struck a chord with the Brandenburg electorate and the Left Party/PDS was rewarded with a substantial 28 percent of the vote. In initial coalition negotiations, the party demanded that the Brandenburg SPD support a catalogue of changes to welfare reforms recently introduced by the federal government.³³ Such an attitude might have been a logical consequence of the Left Party/PDS's election campaign but it was also clearly going to be impossible for the Brandenburg Social Democrats to do (even had they wanted) anything of the sort. The failure of the coalition negotiations was all the more dramatic given that it was widely acknowl-

edged that within the SPD there was genuine interest in working with the Left Party/PDS in what would have been the third such government in the eastern states. Still, in many respects, the failure of red-red to emerge in Brandenburg is easy to understand. The improving relationship between the SPD and CDU (to the detriment of the Left Party/PDS), the falling vote shares for the SPD vis-à-vis its rivals since 1994, and the growing amount of inter-party conflict within the Left Party/PDS clearly made the possibility of SPD-Left Party/PDS coalitions less likely than in Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. On the other hand, there were some propitious conditions for red-red in Brandenburg, including a genuine lack of coalition options for the SPD in light of the absence of the Greens and FDP, as well as a (seemingly) genuine policy convergence between the SPD and Left Party/PDS—up until 2004, that is. Clearly the Left Party/PDS's decision to profile itself as an opposition party—a sign that the Left Party/PDS was worried that entry into another Land government might damage its prospects of re-entering the Bundestag in forthcoming federal election—impacted further the possibility of red-red in Brandenburg.

In sum, only two of eight possible “ideal” conditions came into play in Brandenburg in 2004, compared with seven of eight in MV in 1998 and five of eight in Berlin in 2001. As indicated in Table 3 below, these factors have meant that red-red in Brandenburg in 2004 was much less likely than in Berlin in 2001 or MV in 1998 and 2002. Added to this, of course, is the fact that the party in Brandenburg already had the experiences of Berlin and MV to draw upon, experiences which clearly impacted the party's choices. For the Left Party/PDS, policy concerns seem to have slipped ever further behind the aim of maximizing vote share, particularly as the Brandenburg party appears to campaign principally on what it does not stand for—against the Hartz IV reforms, against the construction of a new Berlin airport in the Brandenburg suburbs, against the institutional fusion of Berlin and Brandenburg. Lothar Bisky hit the nail on the head when he wryly observed that his party is “zwar regierungsfähig, aber nicht regierungswillig” (able to govern, but not willing to do so).³⁴

Table 3: Factors in the Successful Formation of Red-Red Coalitions

	Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (1998)	Berlin (2001)	Brandenburg (2004)
Ideological Distance/ Policy Divergence between SPD and Left Party/ PDS Before Coalition Negotiations	Low	Low	Medium (growing policy differences since 2002)
Office-Seeking Payoff for SPD in Red-red	High	Medium	Medium (because of increasing % for Left Party/PDS)
The SPD's Relationship with Other Possible Coalition Partners at Time of Negotiations	Bad (Grand Coalition 90-94 considered Failure)	Bad (with CDU because grand coalition; bad history with Greens, FDP)	Good (Grand Coalition in 1999)
Presence of Greens?	No	Yes	No
Electoral Gains for SPD from Previous Election?	Yes (+4.8%)	Yes (+7.3%)	No (-7.4%)
Presence of FDP?	No	Yes	No
Intra-Party Conflict Between SPD and Left Party/ PDS at Time of Negotiations	Low	Low	Medium
Inter-Party Conflict Within SPD and Left Party/PDS at Time of Negotiations	Medium	Low	Medium
Likelihood of Coalition	Likely	Likely	Unlikely

Conclusion

SPD-Left Party/PDS relations thus far give us a number of pointers as to whether future Land-level coalitions are likely to take place and under what conditions we might expect them to do so. As we have seen, where red-red coalitions emerged, they did so when other potential coalition partners were unavailable and/or unacceptable (MV, but not Berlin or Brandenburg); where the SPD thought it could gain more on office seeking/strategic terms within the coalition with the Left Party/PDS (MV and Berlin, not Brandenburg); where the ideological range between SPD and the Left Party/PDS was relatively narrow (MV and Berlin, but not Brandenburg); and where the party organizations of each were not bitterly divided or hostile to the other (MV and Berlin, but an increasingly frosty relationship in Brandenburg). In terms of coalition maintenance (see Table 4), the Left Party/PDS in Berlin has satisfied four of five conditions in our framework, while in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania only two of five have been unambiguously satisfied. Not surprisingly, the red-red coalition in MV has been a little less harmonious than the one in Berlin. It should be noted also that in neither state can the Left Party/PDS be said to have clearly delivered for its client groups. Perhaps the key explanatory variables for the smoother performance of the Berlin coalition are therefore the greater amount of inter- and intra-party conflict in MV.

Table 4: Factors in the Successful Maintenance of Red-Red Coalitions (Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Berlin Only)

	Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (1998-2006)	Berlin (2001-present)
Policy Divergence/Policy Friction Between SPD and Left Party/PDS	Low	Low
Cabinet Satisfaction for Both Parties	High	High
Effective Policy-Making for Left Party/PDS's Client Groups	Medium	Low
Intra-Party Conflict Between SPD and Left Party/PDS	Medium	Low
Inter-Party Conflict Within SPD and Left Party/PDS	Medium	Low
Likelihood of Coalition Continued?	Likely	Likely

It is also clear from our analysis that the Left Party/PDS is neither a homogenous nor unitary political actor. Ideological differences, personality clashes, and different strategic agendas ensure that each Land party organization as well as the federal parliamentary party have different profiles and can behave in strikingly different ways. A nuanced and flexible analytical framework is required if the Left Party/PDS's—or any other party for that matter—behavior across time and space is to be genuinely understood. The Left Party/PDS may well (have) governed in both Berlin and MV but it clearly does so for different reasons. Simply put, the Left Party/PDS in Berlin appears to be a genuine office seeker while the Left Party/PDS in MV is much more of a policy-seeker. In Brandenburg, on the other hand, the Left Party/PDS remains a significantly more heterogeneous party that is much more difficult to classify. Unlike in MV, where disagreements within the pragmatic faction can dictate party strategy, the Left Party/PDS in Brandenburg is riddled with conflicts of a much more dramatic nature. Following the gradual departures of Bisky, Vietze and Christoffers, the Left Party/PDS in Potsdam appears to be rudderless and has moved away from both office seeking and policy seeking aims.

Finally, it is worth noting that within coalition governments thus far the Left Party/PDS has found itself in a decidedly inferior power relationship. The various models that purport to explain parties' behavior in coalitions would indicate that this in itself should not be too surprising. The Left Party/PDS has no other prospective coalition

partners and remains relatively new to the world of coalition politics. It is with this in mind that we have tried to tread tentatively here, both in terms of developing models suitable for analyzing the dynamics of red-red coalitions and in interpreting the available evidence. Although our data set is small, a number of tentative hypotheses nonetheless can be forwarded about past, present and future red-red coalitions. Intuitively, it is not surprising to see that where the ideological distance between SPD and Left Party/PDS is low, the chances of coalitions coming into existence increase. But this is only one part of the deal. The SPD must gain a noticeable office seeking pay off and this is likely to be the case where the Greens and the FDP are either weak or non-existent. If the SPD's relationship with the CDU is poor (as was the case in mv) then this further pushes them in the direction of the Left Party/PDS. Amicable personal relationships between social democrats and democratic socialists also help. There is also evidence that if the Left Party/pds is too electorally successful and begins to threaten the SPD's position as the major party in the coalition, then the chances of a coalition coming to fruition will be reduced. All of these hypotheses remain quite tentative of course. Only over time will the data set expand and only then will it be possible to draw more permanent conclusions concerning red-red government.

The Left Party/PDS's march through the institutions of eastern German government gives us a strong indication that the party can "behave" when brought into the coalition equation and can be trusted to keep to agreements and to act rationally. The very fact that the SPD-Left Party/PDS governments in both Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin were confirmed by voters in office tells us that, given the right conditions, the SPD believes the party to be one with whom it can do business. Whether this harmonious relationship can be replicated at the national level remains an altogether different question for three specific reasons. First, the Left Party/PDS's foreign policy positions—naturally of marginal importance in Land politics—remain far too radical for the taste of many Social Democrats. Withdrawing from NATO, pulling Bundeswehr troops out of Afghanistan and other such troubled areas of the world, and the overt anti-Americanism of some of the Left Party/PDS's economic rhetoric make a coalition with the SPD impractical (at best) for the foreseeable future.

Second, a considerable number of SPD activists in the west were dismayed by what they saw as the betrayal of many of the WASG members who chose to leave the Social Democrats in 2005 and 2006. For some, the contempt is returned from the Left Party/PDS side. Given that Land coalitions are only viable in the East at the moment, this is not a major hindrance. As soon as they become an option in the West and at the federal level it is likely that personal animosities will rise in salience. In time, this should be possible. But, on the third hindrance there is likely to be no compromise—former SPD heavy-weight Oskar Lafontaine. Whilst he is active in the upper echelons of the Left Party/PDS, the federal option will remain well and truly off the table.

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Notes

1. Lawrence Dodd, *Coalitions in Parliamentary Government* (Princeton, 1976).
2. Charles Lees, *The Red-Green Coalition in Germany. Politics, Personalities and Power* (Manchester, 2000).
3. Per initial agreements with the WASG, the PDS changed its name to the Left Party before the 2005 federal election while permitting each state party organization to decide whether it wished to campaign on the new name (Linkspartei) or keep the initials PDS in the title as a supplement (i.e., Die Linkspartei. PDS). Furthermore, after the election the WASG began formal negotiations with the Left Party in the attempt to form a “new” party that was to be called the exact same thing. To simplify matters here, we simply use “Left Party/PDS” no matter what the time period.

4. Dan Hough, Jonathan Olsen and Michael Koß, *The Left Party in Contemporary German Politics* (London, 2007), ch. 4.
5. William M. Downs, *Coalition Government Subnational Style* (Columbus, 1998), 20. See also Robert Axelrod, *Conflict of Interest* (Chicago, 1970) and George Tsebelis, *Nested Game: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics* (Berkeley, 1990).
6. See for example William Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, 1962); Michael Leiserson, "Factions and Coalitions in One-Party Japan," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968): 770-787; Michael Leiserson, "Game Theory and the Study of Coalition Behavior," in Sven Groennings, E. W. Kelly and Michael Leiserson, eds., *The Study of Coalition Behavior* (New York, 1970); Abram de Swann, *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formation*. (Amsterdam, 1973); Michael Laver and Kenneth Shepsle, "Coalitions and Cabinet Governments," *American Political Science Review*, 84 no. 3 (1990): 873-890; David Austen-Smith and Jeffery Banks, "Stable Governments and the Allocation of Party Portfolios," *American Political Science Review* 82 (1990): 891-906; Norman Schofield, "Political Competition and Multiparty Coalition Governments," *European Journal of Political Research* 23 (1993): 1-33; Michael Laver, "Theories of Coalition Formation and Local Government Coalitions," in *Political Parties and Coalitions in European Local Government*, eds., Colin Mellors and Bert Pijnenburg (London, 1989).
7. See Klaus von Beyme, "Governments, Parliaments and the Structure of Power in Political Parties," in *Western European Party Systems: Continuity and Change*, eds., Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (London, 1983); Laver and Schepsle (see note 7), 70.
8. Thus, attempts have been made to model coalition bargaining, for example, on the basis of two or more policy dimensions. Concepts of "core parties" that attempt to make themselves unavoidable coalition partners have been introduced, as have models based on portfolio allocation, where parties attempt to control the median legislator for the policy portfolio in question. See Schofield (see note 7), 3; Laver and Shepsle (see note 7).
9. Downs (see note 6).
10. In the German case, Downs's survey illustrates that decisions on who coalesces with whom are taken at the Land level. Ninety-four percent of the Land parliamentarians whom he surveyed claimed that sub-state politicians took the main decisions in German subnational coalition negotiations. This compares with only 44 percent of provincial councilors in Belgium and 60 percent of French subnational politicians. National politicians and national party machines are much more likely get involved in such decision-making processes when volatility (of election results across time in that Land) is high and the party system in that Land arena closely resembles that of Germany as a whole (i.e., "localization" rates remain low). Downs contends that the potential for conflict between the levels rises when volatility and localization are high, and that the less hierarchical a party is, the bigger the deviations from national coalition patterns will be. He also finds some evidence in the German case of bottom-up strategic learning in parties and of a form of spill-over between national and subnational politics. See Downs (see note 6), 195-196 and 274.
11. Charlie Jeffery and Dan Hough, "Germany: An Erosion of Federal-Länder Linkages?" in *Devolution and Electoral Politics*, eds., Dan Hough and Charlie Jeffery (Manchester, 2006).

12. There is, of course, also the possibility of SPD minority governments being formed rather than any sort of formal coalition. Indeed, the Left Party/PDS acted as a support party for an SPD/Green and then SPD administration in Saxony-Anhalt between 1994 and 2002. Whilst clearly a model that has some viability in other European countries, it is likely that minority governments of this type will remain a product of that—very particular—environment. In 1994 and 1998, i.e., *before* the 1998 federal election—had the Land election taken place post September things have been very different—the national spd was very wary of working the PDS in case there was a federal electoral backlash. As it became clear that this was not the case, the SPD preferred to put their relationships with the PDS on more formal footings and a return to such minority governments appears unlikely. For the PDS on the other hand, the toleration model of 1994 had the distinct advantage of being something of a “trial balloon” for government participation—without real government responsibility and power. As the relationship between the Left Party/PDS and SPD (and with other parties) in the East continued to normalize through the 1990s, the advantages of a toleration model began to vanish and the disadvantages—most importantly, the very real inability to construct policy and exercise power—became all too clear. Since 1998, support for the Left Party/PDS’s participation in a minority government/toleration model has decidedly lessened. This is not to say that such governments with Left Party/PDS participation in the future will not occur, only that they are much more unlikely.
13. For a discussion of the poor relationship between the spd and cdu in mv between 1990-1998, see Jonathan Olsen, “Seeing Red: The SPD-PDS Coalition Government in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania,” *German Studies Review* 23, no., 3: 557-580. See also Frank Berg and Thomas Koch, *Politikwechsel in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern?* (Berlin, 2000).
14. For example, although the SPD agreed with the CDU that the budget deficit should be cut and governmental spending curbed, Ringstorff and the SPD leadership argued for more budget flexibility. In particular, the SPD believed that in order to properly address the unemployment problem in the Land (especially among the youth), more, not less, government spending in a few areas/programs would be needed, even while gradually reducing the overall size of the budget. The emphasis given by the SPD to selected public works programs was clearly closer in spirit to the Left Party/PDS than to the CDU.
15. On this see “Ein Kompromiss, der auch die Handschrift der PDS trägt,” PDS-Online, 27 November 2002; available at www.pds-online.de
16. See *Vereinbarung zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (SPD) Landesverband Mecklenburg-Vorpommern und der Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS) Landesverband Mecklenburg-Vorpommern für die 4. Legislaturperiode.*
17. In contrast, in fall 2006 it was the SPD rather than the Left Party/PDS that seemed to be punished for the coalition’s problems in MV. See “Angst vor Minusrekord an der Ostsee”, *Der Spiegel*, 31 August 2006; available at www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland.
18. Holter argued for a red-red coalition as early as 1996, a position that put him in conflict with both the base of the party and the parliamentary group of the Left Party/PDS. Only slowly did attitudes within the party evolve towards Holter’s position, with the near-collapse of the grand coalition in April 1996 doing much to convince the doubters that the party was perilously close to having power

- thrust upon it, and therefore needing to develop some sort of consistent line regarding its conditions of governmental participation. See Thoralf Cleven, "PDS-Chef kam mit blauem Auge davon," *Ostsee Zeitung*, 17 February 1997 and Georg Fehst, "Helmut Holter will Lösungen für die Leute im Land."
19. Christine Richter, "Die Hauptstadt-PDS will auch mal die Faust ballen," *Berliner Zeitung*, 19 December 2003, 20.
 20. For further analysis of electoral behavior in second order elections, see Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results," *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1980): 3-44. For an updated analysis on second order elections in Europe, see Dan Hough, Charlie Jeffery and Michael Keating, eds., "Multi-Level Electoral Competition: Regional Elections and Party Systems in Decentralised States," special issue of *Journal of European Urban and Regional Studies* 10, no. 3 (2003).
 21. As early as a December 1996 party conference, Gregor Gysi proclaimed—to loud applause from the assembled delegates—that Berlin offered the opportunity to make significant progress in the western Länder. According to Gysi, the Berlin Left Party/PDS needed to play a vanguard role in overcoming the East-West divide in the city by shaping and molding policy outputs for the benefit of all. "Berliner PDS will Machtwechsel," *Berliner Zeitung*, 2 December 1996.
 22. Tobias Miller, "Wir wollen Magdeburger Verhältnisse," *Berliner Zeitung*, 24 November 1997.
 23. Interestingly, the Berlin SPD believed that the Greens were too dependent on their rather awkward rank and file. This is something that the SPD does not need to fret about with the Left Party/PDS. See Andreas Rabenstein, "Kinnhaken von der Berliner Basis," *Welt am Sonntag*, 20 June 2004, 76.
 24. "Keiner wird gewinnen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 December 2001.
 25. "Umfrage: Berlins Senat ohne Mehrheit," *Die Welt*, 15 July 2002.
 26. Michael Mara, "Die PDS sucht ihr Oppositionsprofil," *Tagespiegel*, 21 March 2000.
 27. Lothar Bisky and Kornelia Wehlan, "Brandenburger Weg ist endgültig zu Ende," *Pressedienst*, 45 (1999).
 28. "Die PDS in Koalitionslaune," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 February 1997.
 29. Michael Mara, "Die PDS denkt sich ins Mitregieren hinein," *Tagespiegel*, 14 January 1997.
 30. Mara (see note 27).
 31. See Andrea Beyerlein, "Kampf um Bisky-Nachfolge beginnt," *Berliner Zeitung*, 9 July 2003, 24.
 32. Christoph Seils, "Gebremste Kandidatin," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 13 September 2004, 3.
 33. Thomas Nord, "Brandenburg: Für weiteren Sozialabbau steht die PDS nicht zur Verfügung," *Pressedienst* 41 (2004).
 34. "Bisky: PDS will zurzeit nicht regieren," *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 January 2003, 22.