Coalition statements in German Federal Election Campaigns
Are they a preliminary stage of coalition formation or strategic-tactical campaign instruments?

Thomas Schubert

1. The democratic desideratum versus the power-political desire

In the German system of parliamentary government, coalitions are the rule particularly on the federal level. Due to the “replicating effect” (Maurice Duverger) of proportional representation, most political parties are coerced into cooperations with other parties in order to create a parliamentary majority. Therefore, coalition statements should, according to democratic theorists, be presented to the electorate before every election to clarify which coalitions they intend to form after the election. In addition to their opportunity to determine the composition of parliaments, citizens need to be involved in the process of delegating governmental power among the parties. Ultimately, forming a coalition in parliamentarism is, along with delegation, the most important mechanism of allocating political power and should not be withdrawn from the electorate. Nevertheless, whoever consider it as a fundamental obligation of democratic parties to guarantee the governability of the political system and to organize the power of the state must ensure, that parties provide pre-electoral coalition statements. Such early “coalition statements” or “coalition signals” can increase the value of an election, if they bring greater clarity with regard to potential governmental coalitions. In an ideal situation, these types of coalition statements allow the electorate (a possibility to elect a coalition does not exist) to consider missing majoritarian effects as well as certain coalitions and under these assumptions, by tactical voting, to influence directly the relative strengths of the parliamentary parties in favour of or against a coalition. The more diffuse, instrumentalized or miscued parties’ pre-

---

3 cf. Josef Anton Völk, Regierungskoalitionen auf Bundesebene, Regensburg 1989, p. 223; Sona Nadenichek Golder, Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary
electoral statements are, the less the voters’ choice will prejudice the formation of the government, the more the vote will become tainted with uncertainties. For some political scientists this indicates a democratic “deficiency”, because voters’ power then is limited to the composition of the legislature.

In the specific case of pre-electoral coalition statements the democratic-theoretical desideratum of maximal participation collides with the power-and party-political desire of being independent and flexible. A normative and power-political conflict of goals and strategies can be seen. Whereas voters’ influence on the formation of government increases, if parties send out serious pre-electoral coalition signals, parties see themselves confronted with an utmost ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, pre-electoral coalition statements help them to reduce uncertainty and complexity when forming a coalition. Furthermore, its influence on voting behaviour (if pre-electoral coalition signals enlighten or even mislead voters remains to be seen now) might lead to advantages for some parties, for instance by generating “loaned-votes” or “coalition-votes” for potential small allies or by announcing a political “project” that may raise faith in the capacity of parties to act in a future governmental cooperation. On the other hand, pre-electoral coalition statements are disadvantageous, if as Frank Decker argues, they irritate or “deter potential voters” or “give up various options for political action”.


Decker (note 5), p. 33.
titors), pre-electoral coalition signals can prove to be a hindrance by “exceedingly restricting the manoeuvrability of parties forming a coalition”. Particularly, the modification of a previously made coalition statement after an election is an incalculable risk in the German political context, where pre-electoral coalition commitments are mainly linked “with moral terms like ‘credibility’, ‘reliability’ and less with the terms ‘purposiveness’” or suitability. For this reason, some kind of “emergency exit” in coalitions statements are usual but quite problematic. “Emergency stops” in terms of broken promises are becoming widely ostracised by voters as well as by political opponents. This is especially the case, if the alternatively sought coalition is inter-factional or if the anti-extremist consensus is broken up. Then, the historic-cultural context and strong coalitional path dependencies can forestall some pre-electoral coalition signals.

For this reason, in their preparation of pre-electoral coalition statements, parties are forced into strategic considerations as well as having to balance coalitional aspects against aspects of competition. This leads us to our central question: Do pre-electoral coalition statements follow serious coalitional requests or must they primarily be seen as strategic-tactical instruments of election campaigns? Are they sincere and sober images of a “political willing” (Josef Anton Völk) or are they communicative frippery on the “funfair of election campaign” (Theodor Eschenburg)? Pre-electoral coalition statements – according to my assumption – used to be multifunctional instruments of inter-party competition, which requires a critical examination and a differentiated view. Hence, chapter two reflects theoretically on possible factors of influence on coalition statements and focuses on pre-electoral coalition statements as possible instruments of inter-party competition. For that reason, it creates a model of pre-electoral coalition statements. The following qualitative empirical analysis (chapter three) prove to some extent their strategic backgrounds and objectives using the Federal Election Campaign 2009 as an object of study. According to its actor-oriented approach the study puts specific emphasis on parties’ behaviour. Finally, some reflections on the (possible) future relevance of pre-electoral coalition statements conclude the article.

---

9 Völk (note 3), p. 82.
2. Multifunctional pre-electoral coalition statement in the model

Coalition statements ahead of elections have become “naturalized” (Harald Schoen) amongst German parties and play an increasingly important role in the currently diffusing party system. Despite their ubiquity and complexity, their normative significance, and their proven influence on coalition formation and electoral behaviour, only little about the phenomenon is known. More precisely, we know more about the effects of the phenomenon than about the phenomenon itself. For Germany, beyond some significant quantitative empirical studies, little research work has been done. Larger research studies on coalitions mostly just touches the issue of pre-electoral coalition statements. This is despite the fact that several kinds of these coalition statements (especially pre-electoral coalitions) in some of the (mainly post-electoral orientated) coalition studies meanwhile are seen as an early or first phase of coalition formation. As such, more recent German studies have concentrated on the electoral effects of coalition statements. How do pre-electoral coalition statements influence electoral behaviour and formation of government? Thomas Bräuninger and Marc Debus, for example, show their significant impact on the coalition formation in the German Länder and at the federal level. Moreover, parties are able to influence voting behaviour by making coalition signals before elections as Franz Urban Pappi et al. found out. “That part of voters, which is susceptible to strategic thinking, reacts consistently onto parties’ coalition signals.” Also Eric Linhart confirms their enormous relevance for the

11 See the critic of Golder (note 6), p. 4; Golder (note 7), p. 645.
decision-making of strategic “coalition-voters”. The following dictum, stated by Sona Nadenichek Golder in 2006, is holding true: „Pre-electoral coalitions are important.” Nevertheless, almost all of these studies display a reduced or idealized way of looking at the phenomenon. If in terms of broad postulates of rationality or a (often too) simple distinction into positive and negative coalition signals, what might be stringent at the respective analytical contexts can be insufficient for a detailed analysis of pre-electoral coalition statements. The reason why parties make different kinds of coalition statements for different purposes remains unconsidered.

Hence, Frank Decker and Volker Best, two Bonn scholars who have dealt with this problem for years, plead for a more differentiated view. Thus pre-electoral coalition signals are conspicuously often “a potential object of the competitive political conflict”.

Terminologically, pre-electoral coalition statements, signals or preferences must be first distinguished from so-called pre-electoral coalitions or pre-election pacts. These latter ones are, as Sona Nadenichek Golder defines, fixed electoral cooperations (in the form of coordinated election campaigns or collective candidates or party lists) with which parties publicly express their commitment not to act in competition and point out their future governmental cooperation. In this article, as shown later, it is equal with a positive and mutual pre-electoral coalition statement of maximum intensity. Accordingly, pre-electoral coalition statements are even more complex phenomena.

They can be differentiated and systematised with the help of a two-step model combining varying categories of coalitional objectives and coalition statements (illustration 1). In the first step, the model points out possible qualitative and quantitative strategic coalition aims the statements usually tend to follow. The qualitative aims take account of the four main interest parties that are pursued by forming coalitions: (1) accumulation of power, (2) governmental stability, (3) policy output, and (4) intended integration of

---

16 Golder (note 6), p. 7.
17 References can be found at Völk (note 3), S. 65-142, 164-166, Jesse (note 4); and Marco Michel, Die Bundestagswahlkämpfe der FDP 1949-2002, Wiesbaden 2005.
19 cf. Golder (note 6), S. 12.
interests. The quantitative aims contain the intended kind of coalition, differentiated to the usual range from one-party minority governments to all-party coalitions. Both coalitional objectives are strongly influenced by the fact that parties in reference to coalitions strive for optimal individual results whilst following three traditional patterns of “competitive political party behaviour”: vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking.\textsuperscript{20} Parties who are vote-seekers tend to maximise their governmental empowerment by gaining extensive electoral support. Those, who aspire to participate more fully in government (office-seeking), try to raise their political power by maximising their control over political office. Finally, policy-seeking parties are taking precedence in program and policy implementation. Depending on which combination of aims and strategies is most relevant for a party, specific coalitional objectives will determine specific pre-electoral coalition statements.\textsuperscript{21} For example, if a party which is driven by vote- and office-seeking motives plans to form a one-party majority government, its actions will be targeted at a maximal accumulation of power, a high governmental stability and an optimal policy output. In oversized coalitions, which are – in contrast – mainly led by policy-seeking motives, parties have to lower their sights in the matters of accumulation of power and individual policy output. Such coalitions in general stand for a wide policy implementation and integration of interests as well as for a high stability of government. Parties who strive to become a junior partner in a two party coalition have to follow multifarious coalitional objectives. Whereas some of them try to achieve a more favourable distribution of office (conceivably at the expense of policy agreements), others are just looking for a moderate accumulation of power while primarily trying to influence the governmental policy output in their favour. Finally, parties that want to remain in the opposition, having neither quantitative nor qualitative coalition aims, are also likely to express pre-electoral coalition signals but mainly for tactical or strategic campaign purposes.

On the second step pre-electoral coalition statements, here understood as a method of strategy implementation and goal attainment, are on the one hand differentiated in a horizontal dimension that includes positive, negative

and neutral forms. That is to say, parties indicate their preferences more or less clearly, refuse political alliances or deliberately left open coalitional questions. Due to the fact that they are long-lasting, complex and widespread phenomena, positive and negative versions of pre-electoral coalition statements take on a more important role. Negative signals are furthermore divided into the rejection of own and foreign options. By doing so, potential instrumentalizations become visible. In both cases (negative or positive), the expressed coalition options can be just fictions, thus made without any serious relation to reality. On the other hand, a vertical scheme with the following categories is used to differentiate pre-electoral coalition statements: motive, seriousness, instrumentality, symmetry, quality, intensity, optionality, and conditionality.

Contrary to Golders assumption, party cooperation before elections should be made visible to the voters, and according to Decker/Best, the model separates implicit (unannounced, sometimes just symbolized) from explicit (publicly stated) pre-electoral coalition preferences or exclusions as well as binding from non-binding statements (quality). A further distinction shows if coalition signals are bilateral, unilateral or contradictory (symmetry). For instance, if two parties are expressing the same interests, either sympathy or antipathy, it is then a clear bilateral pre-electoral coalition statement (strong symmetry). “There is strong asymmetry, if positive and negative coalition signals collide, thus one partner would like to form a coalition, whereas the other does not.” Statements are contradictory, if a party declares something that obviously differs from any other of their usual political behaviour – e.g. outward rejection, inward endorsement.

The three strategic categories are central: motive, seriousness, instrumentality. Do pre-electoral coalition statements want to enable or to prevent coalitions? Do they pursue executive power or not? Are they real or are they staged? Can they be regarded as constituent parts of elections campaigns? If so, in what form as active or reactive elements? Intensity describes the strength of pre-electoral coalition statements, allowing for judgement about their strategic relevance. Therefore, the model creates

---

22 Most of the studies divide these three forms of pre-electoral coalition statements. cf. Debus (note 13), p. 46; Pappi/Herzog/Schmitt (note 14), p. 497; Linhart (note 15), p. 472.
different types for every dimension.\textsuperscript{26} For instance, positive coalition statements are wavering between weak-passive and strong-active preferences or signals as well as clear pre-electoral coalitions as types of maximum intensity. A party who rejects certain alliances can do this passively (just on request) or actively (of one’s own accord). Confrontative and delegitimising refusals are of high intensity, but they are mostly intended less coalitional and more in the sense of campaign strategies. Highly improbable coalitions, for example between Christian Democrats and the Left Party, often remain entirely unnamed.

Further categories (which do not apply to all dimensions) are \textit{optionality}, graded by primary, secondary and tertiary preferences, as well as \textit{conditionality} (restricted in terms of parties, persons or issues).\textsuperscript{27} Most parties like to make use of coalitional preferences that divide partners into first, second or third choices. Thus, they can send out diverse pre-electoral coalition signals and thereby keep various options in the event of an unexpected election outcome. Possible alternatives can be conditioned differently, ranged from a “no ifs, no buts” up to clear personal or programmatic exclusion criterions. Should parties release statements expressing that it is too early to form a coalition with party X, this in itself cannot be inferred as a temporary condition but as an unmistakable and unconditioned rejection of this option. Conditions ultimately, must be satisfiable by parties in the coalition formed after the elections.

However, pre-electoral coalition statements are not only multidimensional, they are also (particularly out of parties perspective) multifunctional. (1) Whilst following strategic coalition aims they are serious signals towards political competitors for or against a governmental cooperation after election. This means they pursue a coalitional function. (2) Whilst pointing or ruling out coalition options they show up a parties’ position to the electorate. In this sense their function is to influence voters’ behaviour. (3) Closely associated with this, they are instruments of inter-party campaign strategies. This means that their function is to influence election campaigns. Despite the lack of research concerning coalition-related election campaigns\textsuperscript{28} it can be accepted, that parties during their

\textsuperscript{26} See the patterns of identity at Decker (note 3), p. 435; Völk (note 3), p. 82.
electoral competition take up coalitional aspects in various ways, for instance to be able to estimate bilateral coalition options,\(^{29}\) or to extract considerable advantages in the struggle for votes. Caroll/Cox point to this crucial role „pre-election pacts“ play for type and extend of parties involvement in election campaigns. „Pacts change parties’ incentives to exert effort during the campaign in ways that benefit the pact-forming parties“.\(^{30}\) Coalitional speculations in the mass media also force parties to act, whereby the objective of governmental does not always stand in the foreground. In the same way, efforts to establish oneself politically and to prevent intra-fractional rivalry or opposing coalitions, as well as tactical motives, can cause coalition statements. The cooperative aspect is in the case of pre-electoral coalition statements just one (though an important one) among many. In comparison to coalitions, in which cooperative patterns of behaviour complement or overlay competitive patterns and in this way reduce the inter-party competition (partnership games), pre-electoral coalition statements occur mostly in times of an extended party competition (zero sum games).

For these reasons, coalition statements should be influenced by the same four inter-party strategies parties normally configure their election campaigns with.\(^{31}\) (1) **Cooperation strategies** try to stop inter-party competition with the objective to generate a mutual future benefit (government coalition). On the basis of the maxim: “Enhancement of performance and power by cooperation”.\(^{32}\) In terms of positive, real executive power pursuing pre-electoral coalition statements, cooperation strategies play a major role in a coalitional democracy. (2) **Confrontation strategies** combine all sorts of coalition oriented offensive or counter strategies. Their objective is to optimize their own benefit and at the same time damage the political opponent. Confrontative or delegitimising refusals are variants just as warnings of “perilous” coalitions. (3) These latter ones can also be a result of **instrumentalization strategies**, whose single objective is to raise their own benefit. The opponent becomes thereby a useful means to their own strategy; his balance of benefits becomes irrelevant. Especially


\(^{30}\) Carroll/Cox (note 12), p. 304.


when confronted with negative or contradictory coalition signals, researchers often disregard the option that it could be a question of instrumentalized coalition statements. (4) By using conflict prevention strategies parties blind out their opponents and decline any kind of coalitional discussions. What matters is the need to maximise their benefits, most notably at parties seeking a majority of votes or seats.

Hence, it can be said: The common assumption that anti-system parties or populist parties (that are neither accepted by the “established ones” as political players nor are willing to form a coalition) fail as coalitional actors does not apply for all pre-electoral coalition signals. Governmental irrelevance, in this case does not mean irrelevance in general. The spectre of players concerning coalition signals always turns out larger than the number of potential coalitional parties. Coalitional aversion does not necessarily imply communicative isolation. Anti-system or populist parties can be a part of instrumentalization strategies of established parties or bring themselves up for political discussion by staging pre-electoral coalition signals. For example, in the run-up to the German Federal Election 1987, the then widely radicalised and by other parties as radical-scolded Green Party, announced to tolerate a social democratic minority government in case of a red-green majority. Yet, their list of unrealizable demands undermined the seriousness of their undertaking. Apparently similar, was the shamed offer to help elect a social-democratic chancellor in the case of a “left” majority, made by the fundamental oppositional Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) during the Federal Election Campaign in 1994. In either instance, small parties instrumentalized pre-electoral coalition statements to raise their profile during campaigns, whereas the social democrats refused the ‘offers’ twice. If smaller parties instead seriously aspire to governmental participation, then they should take a clear position prior to elections. The Free Democrats (FDP) for example, obtained “outstanding double-digit election results when they stated strong pre-electoral coalition preferences in favour of the Christian Democrats from an oppositional position”. In cases of an unclear attitude of potential smaller coalition partners, some parts of

major parties’ electorate withhold their “loaned votes” and decide in favour of “their” party instead. If the smaller ones, however, send out positive signals they can receive such “loaned-votes”, but in doing so they block other chances in the aftermath of the election. Should they decide not to state any coalitional preferences before an election and act as an independent third force (like the FDP in 1957), the tactical ticket splitting to their benefit will decrease\(^{35}\) but they will keep a maximal variety of coalitional opportunities after election.

To sum up, our knowledge concerning the strategic meaning of pre-electoral coalition statements have for parties acting is vague and heterogeneous. One can surely say that cost-benefit considerations are to the fore with regard of the strategic use of coalition signals in a pre-election period. This applies not only to pre-electoral alliances.\(^ {36}\) But nonetheless, one should consider that election campaigns, usually take place under enormous time pressure and a high level of uncertainty, “always teetering on the brink of chaos”\(^{37}\). For parties this makes it harder to act strategically and operate tactically, even in the case of pre-electoral coalition statements.

3. Multifunctional pre-electoral coalition statements in practice 2009

Two examples from the 2009 Federal Election Campaign should prove our considerations and show the strategic and tactical instrumentality of pre-electoral coalition statements. The first sample is concerned with coalition signals made by the Free Democrats. For several reasons, alliance questions determined the election campaign. (1) The “black-red” coalitionists show in 2009 (at least rhetorically) aversions for further cooperation in a grand coalition. (2) “Black-Yellow”, the coalition of Christian Democrats and Free Democrats, seemed to be uncertain, (3) a red-green alliance improbable. (4) Moreover, after formation of a minority government (tolerated by the Left Party) in Hesse had failed, the Social Democrats denied stoutly every cooperation with the Left Party at the federal level. Driven by an iron will to govern after eleven years in opposition the Free Democrats needed to send out clear-cut coalition signals in such a challenging political environment.


\(^{36}\) Pre-electoral alliances raise the chances of government participation. Parties supposing an independent strategy as the best way, waive normally pre-electoral agreements. cf. Golder (note 6), p. 134, 143.

Not least, the main body of their partisan voters awaited a plain positioning. And it should be added that the FDP in election years without a clear respectively reliable coalitional preference (1957/1969/2002) always performed badly. In the media and via political opponents the FDP furthermore got a scolding as a party that willingly gives in after elections ("Umfallpartei"), vacating once represented positions for reasons of power politics. To put it in a nutshell: the Liberals had to show their colours.

Already short after the Federal Election Campaign 2005, when the Liberals preferred a black-yellow coalition, FDP party leader Guido Westerwelle had spoken out in favour of stable two-party-alliances and against any tripartite cooperations with the Greens. The Free Democrats carried this attitude in 2009, although under great uncertainties. On the one side, as Hans Vorländer argues, the FDP owed its new strength at all political levels to their close proximity to the Christian Democrats, which required once more a black-yellow commitment. On the other side, at the beginning of 2009 – beside a grand coalition – just a three-way coalition spanning different political camps seemed to have majority appeal. In spite of that, the Free Democrats promoted a coalition with the CDU and CSU throughout the campaign, but abstained for some time from a final pre-electoral coalition statement for tactical reasons. With their early announcement, to reveal the exact coalitional preference in the week before election, an elongated competition on this issue started between the Christian Democrats and the FDP. Unlike in 2005, both parties asserted no fixed coalition project, but struggled for unambiguous and committed statements as well as for centre-right voters (partly in a hard competition). The coalition question became on both sides an “issue of competitive discord” and with it a strategic and tactical element. First, end of May 2009, Christian Democrats and Liberals interpreted the re-election of Horst Köhler as Federal President as a coalitional signal. However, the Christian Democrats at that time did not commit themselves to a black-yellow coalition in 2009, although under great uncertainties. On the one side, as Hans Vorländer argues, the FDP owed its new strength at all political levels to their close proximity to the Christian Democrats, which required once more a black-yellow commitment. On the other side, at the beginning of 2009 – beside a grand coalition – just a three-way coalition spanning different political camps seemed to have majority appeal. In spite of that, the Free Democrats promoted a coalition with the CDU and CSU throughout the campaign, but abstained for some time from a final pre-electoral coalition statement for tactical reasons. With their early announcement, to reveal the exact coalitional preference in the week before election, an elongated competition on this issue started between the Christian Democrats and the FDP. Unlike in 2005, both parties asserted no fixed coalition project, but struggled for unambiguous and committed statements as well as for centre-right voters (partly in a hard competition). The coalition question became on both sides an “issue of competitive discord” and with it a strategic and tactical element. First, end of May 2009, Christian Democrats and Liberals interpreted the re-election of Horst Köhler as Federal President as a coalitional signal. However, the Christian Democrats at that time did not commit themselves to a black-yellow coalition.
coalition, as a lever Guido Westerwelle brought an alliance with SPD and Greens into effect. Not least his social advances had been non-serious. The Free Democrats followed vote- and office-seeking-strategies and thus clear coalition aims: to end the grand coalition, prevent a left-wing coalition, form a coalition with Christian Democrats.

A party conference on 20 September 2007, strategically intended in every sense and full of symbolic power, finally issued a coalition statement. Equipped with a purpose of executive power and therefore trustworthy, the Free Democrats sent out a positive, explicit, and just as binding, coalition signal in favour of a “centrist government with the Union”. In contrast to the Greens, that in accordance with their strategy of the “double opening” (Christoph Egle) and their credo (“contents are above power”) had left open different options (two-party coalitions, three-party coalitions, left-wing coalition), the FDP went without any alternative – apart from an unmentioned “Jamaika Koalition” (which was in turn ruled out by the Greens and therefore impossible). The liberal “oath” of course, only partly had a coalitional function. First and foremost it implemented a vote-maximizing strategy. The party propagated the irritating device that just a strong FDP could prevent the Christian Democrats from slipping into a grand coalition again. As the analyses of vote-splitting, shift of votes and of the effects caused by pre-electoral coalition statements show, the Free Democrats were right. Just as clear was the strategic background of the parallel given negative signals, yet they made no sense because of the steadfast black-yellow statements. By proclaiming, the FDP will “not turn into the stirrup holder of Red-Green” and not accept a red-yellow-green “traffic light coalition”, the party strengthened their only positive option. Much more tangible were the purposes of confrontation and instrumentalization that were concealed behind the spread story, the Social Democrats planned to form a left-wing coalition out of a previously established grand coalition. Similar to the delegitimizing negative pre-electoral coalition statement in 1983, as the Free Democrats warned against


a red-green coalition even though the Greens described themselves as “unwilling to govern” and in addition were scolded as “incapable to govern” by the Social Democrats, the FDP used the rejection of a (fictive) foreign option to raise their share of the vote. Even in 2005 the party had issued warnings against a left-wing coalition, which was “strategically favourable” for them as Eric Linhart points out. And also in 2009 the Liberals should have been benefited from red-red-green ghosts by influencing many voters with such a staged coalition signal. Overall, the Free Democrats in this way combined successfully aspects of coalition politics with elements of campaign strategies.

Our second sample is concerned with the (more or less direct) Social Democratic promotion of a “traffic light coalition”. In the early 1990s Frank Nullmeier, Joachim Raschke and Helmut Wiesendahl outlined the possible end of a grand coalition as follows: “At the end of a grand coalition a then strengthened SPD theoretically can choose between three coalitional constellations: red-yellow, red-green or ‘traffic light’.” In 2009, the grand coalition ended under very different circumstances. The SPD was threatened by a historic electoral defeat. Their coalition options were just as limited as their serious pre-electoral coalition statements. Because the preferred red-green minimal winning coalition (the Greens also stated a clear preference in favour of Red-Green) was out of reach, the Social Democrats instead set upon a “traffic light coalition”, and (secondarily) upon a grand coalition. Nonetheless, the SPD abstained from conspicuous pre-electoral coalition statements supporting their preferred alternatives and mostly relied on a passive way by not precluding a “traffic light coalition” or a grand coalition. Instead much more clearly the Social Democrats refused any governmental cooperation with the The Left Party, whether in the form of a majority or in form of a minority government. For the socialists, that were partly “unwilling to govern”, this categorical rejection on the one side refused them any opportunity of governmental participation. On the other side the party used it as a welcome chance to run an – widely seeable – instrumentalization. In retaliation, The Left declared the Social Democrats as personally and contentually incapable of governing and staged therewith a rejection of a fictive coalition option.

More predictable – not only because the FDP damned a “traffic light coalition” – was the performed instrumentalization given by the social democratic pre-electoral coalition signals for an alliance with Greens and Liberals. Underlying this was above all a barely conceived strategy. With their visible signal the SPD apparently tried to drive a wedge between the coming liberal-conservative partners and tangle the Free Democrats in hazy speculations on coalitions to thwart their potential alliance. To their entourage, as Frank Decker and Volker Best assert, the Social Democrats gave hope that the FDP after years of opposition would certainly change the political camp in the case of a missing liberal-conservative majority. Even though vast parts of SPD supporters preferred a “traffic light coalition”, the authors say, the party was faced with a “problem of credibility”. They were running a negative campaign against the Liberals whilst at the same time presenting a governmental coalition involving the FDP as a desirable alternative. Not only were there serious contentious differences (such as fiscal policy) between the SPD and the FDP, which were rhetorically diminished by some and deepened by others, the primary tactical character of the widely contradictory social democratic coalition signal was brought to light.

Threatened by a massive electoral defeat, the SPD had to pretend strength. By nominating a chancellor candidate (Frank-Walter Steinmeier) the party therefore pursued a (unrealistic) strategy of governmental leadership. Meanwhile, the only remaining realistic way to power was to prevent the formation of a black-yellow coalition and therewith (non-public) to enforce the resumption of the grand coalition. But, just to be able to tell voters in an election campaign of what they are fighting against and omitting what they are fighting for, as Oskar Niedermayer in reference to the SPD noted, is “a heavy burden”. For that reason, the Social Democrats held onto their contradictory coalition signal in the direction of the FDP to the very end. When the Free Democrats at their party conference finally abjured a “traffic light coalition”, the SPD was without any governmental option. Yet, the Social Democrats (owed to their party tactics) held onto the idea of a coalition with the Greens and Liberals. This was completely non-serious, especially considering that such a coalition meanwhile was

50 Decker/Best (note 18), p. 183.
52 Niedermayer (note 42), p. 209.
regarded as politically unrealizable by the electorate. SPD leaders’ strong view, whatever the Free Democrats may decide at their party conferences as the last word would always be spoken by the voters, only signalized despair and ignorance towards the political competitor. SPD general secretary Hubertus Heil held a confused coalitional construction to the end: “We want Frank-Walter Steinmeier to become chancellor and therefore we are fighting for a strong SPD. If we can stop Black-Yellow, the SPD is going to govern and has a chance of the Federal Chancellery. A social-liberal and ecological alliance is still achievable. Finally, the realities of life do not follow tactically motivated resolutions of FDP party conferences. I know a lot of liberals who do not want to become a permanent appendix of CDU. Because the Left Party is not incapable to govern and the grand coalition can be no permanent institution if the Liberals have to jump.” This instrumentalization of a “traffic light” had already failed at that moment, a fact that some observers had predicted prior to the campaign: “The SPD cannot credibly establish a traffic light strategy, if such a coalition will be far away from a majority, it is ostracized by the Free Democrats, and a section of the social democratic leadership bear broad sympathies for continuing the grand coalition.” In a “campaign of wishful thinking” (Matthias Machnig) the party chased a shadow. Their pre-electoral coalition signals admittedly combined elements of coalitional politics and campaign strategy, but they failed to have the desired effect because of their asymmetric character and their obvious staging.

4. Multiple functions and dimensions of pre-electoral coalition statements

Pre-electoral coalition statements must be seen and understood in terms of coalition politics as well as in terms of campaign strategy and tactics. In its multifunctionality they are serious images of political willing and instruments of political campaigning. On the one hand, parties express with pre-electoral coalition statements serious coalitional preferences or deny unwanted cooperations, depending on their coalition aims more or less.

54 Interview with Hubertus Heil, in: Kölner Stadtanzeiger from 21 September 2009.
Hence, some parts of deductive research about coalitions legitimately see positive coalition preferences or pre-electoral coalitions as preliminary stages of coalition formation. On the other hand, and this shows an evident research gap, pre-electoral coalition statements play an important role in the inter-party competition as strategic and tactical instruments of election campaigns. Its cooperative aspect is just one of many – albeit a significant one. Whereas cooperation-oriented coalition statements often are integral strategic parts of election campaigns, not all of them pursue a serious cooperative intention. Signals indeed can be used to enlarge and consolidate an opposition role, and they are elements of confrontation strategies or are used as means of instrumentalization and staging.

Especially as instruments of inter-party actions pre-electoral coalition signals are hardly explored. It is still unclear for instance, how coalition statements, that are expressed between incumbent coalition partners, differ from such signified by potential coalition partners. What separates pre-electoral coalition statements of governing and opposition parties? How does intra-party decision-making take place? What are the effects that intra-party fragmentation and conflicts have on parties’ pre-electoral coalition statements? Or how does the current change of the German party system affect parties’ willingness to send out coalition signals? Does a changing political environment influence the strategic-tactical direction of coalition signals perhaps by a stronger instrumentalization of positive or negative statements?

In the mid-term future, the German party democracy should transform into a volatile and heterogeneous five party system. Although “classical” two party coalitions are momentarily still the rule, many-faced coalition formations and “alliance beyond political camps” (Franz Walter) are becoming more likely. The outcome of the Federal Election 2005 prevented for the first time the forming of a “classical” (that means within a political camp) two party minimal winning coalition; with the grand coalition as a consequence. Even though the electoral outcome in 2009 enabled a black-yellow coalition again, since then one can recognize a certain drawback into political camps: Greater fragmentation and a sometimes-nebulous segmentation of the party system increases parties’ opportunities in sending coalition signals prior to elections. Erratic political newbies, like the pirate party, spice up the political game. Pre-electoral coalition statements become more complex. For that reason and because of a waxing immoderate instrumentalization and staging, new coalitional options “beyond political
camps”, an increasingly volatile voting electorate and because of the rising influence election campaigns have on vote decisions, an unprecedented confusion might be the result. Anyone, actor or spectator, who wants to find the way in the undergrowth of pre-electoral coalition statements, needs a reliable orientation. The drawn up perspective, that pre-electoral coalition statements are multidimensional and multifunctional, should facilitate the understanding and interpreting.
**Illustration 1: Two-step model of pre-electoral coalition statements**

### 1st step: coalition aims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>qualitative coalition aims</th>
<th>quantitative coalition aims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) accumulation of power / (2) governmental stability / (3) policy output / (4) integration of interests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) minority government (one or more parties) / (2) one-party winning / (3) minimal winning coalition / (4) grand coalition / (5) oversized coalition / (6) all-party coalition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### factor of influence: party strategies

- vote-seeking
- office-seeking
- policy-seeking

### factor of influence: campaign strategies

- cooperation strategy
- confrontation strategy
- instrumentalization strategy
- conflict prevention strategy

### 2nd step: pre-electoral coalition statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>dimension</th>
<th>positive</th>
<th>negative</th>
<th>neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>motive</strong></td>
<td>enable a coalition / prevent a coalition</td>
<td>rejection (fictive) of own options</td>
<td>rejection (fictive) of foreign options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>seriousness</strong></td>
<td>real, with executive power purpose / real, without executive power purpose / staged, with executive power purpose / staged, without executive power purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>instrumentality</strong></td>
<td>no constituent part of election campaigns / reactive constituent part of election campaigns / active constituent part of election campaigns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>symmetry</strong></td>
<td>bilateral / unilateral / contradictory signals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>quality</strong></td>
<td>explicit / implicit – binding / non-binding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>intensity</strong></td>
<td>passive coalition statements or signals / active coalition statements or signals / pre-electoral coalition statements or signals / pre-electoral coalitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>optionality</strong></td>
<td>primary / secondary / tertiary preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>conditionality</strong></td>
<td>without condition / with restrictive condition</td>
<td>without condition / with restrictive condition</td>
<td>without condition / with restrictive condition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### quality

- passive / active
- rejection / active rejection / confrontative rejection / de-legitimising rejection
- passive neutrality / active neutrality / ignoring

### intensity

- passive coalition statements or signals / active coalition statements or signals / pre-electoral coalition statements or signals / pre-electoral coalitions
- passive / active / confrontative / de-legitimising
- passive / active neutrality / ignoring