Denominational Conflicts and Party Breakthrough: The Negative Case of the All-German People's Party

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Abstract. National party breakthrough has often been attributed to new or previously minor parties seizing favorable political opportunities. The role of their strategic choices in response to political opportunities, however, has been under-explored because less attention has been paid to relevant negative cases, i.e. instances when parties encounter favorable conditions without breaking through. This article argues for a historical perspective when selecting these cases and investigates an often overlooked case from Germany's early post-war democracy: Gustav Heinemann's All-German People's Party (GVP). Relying on archival data and historical research, the paper reconstructs the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants that provided Heinemann with initially favorable conditions for party breakthrough. Strategic decisions on coalition building, the timing of party formation, and organization building explain the GVP's failure to seize the opportunity. These findings highlight the importance of case selection as a part of the "historical turn" in political science and of new parties' agency when explaining (the lack of) party breakthrough. The implications of these findings for the literature on new parties, case selection, and party system development are discussed.

Keywords. Party breakthrough, political parties, negative cases, Germany, religion

I. Introduction[*]

The political union between Protestant and Catholic Christians has been an important innovation in Germany's post-war democracy. For the first time, Protestants and Catholics came together in a major political party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The inter-denominational merger helped reconcile a long-standing societal division, overcome the political fragmentation of the center and center-right of the Weimar years, and contributed toward the consolidation of Germany's post-war 2.5-party system. Knowing the political development of the last 70 years, we might be tempted to regard the merger between both denominations as a historical inevitability. Many classic studies have highlighted the normative desire to leave behind pre-war conflicts and the path-setting effect of initial restrictions on party competition when explaining the rise of the CDU and low levels of party system fragmentation (e.g. Loewenberg 1971: 268-76; Pridham 1977: 21-39; Rogers 1995 [chapter 6]). Recent work by historians, in contrast, has revealed a high level of uncertainty and contingency that characterized the relationship between Protestants and Catholics in Germany's early post-war years (e.g. Bösch 2001; Klein 2005).

This paper focuses on an under-studied political party that, at the time, caused significant concerns over a renewed political divide between Catholics and Protestants: Gustav Heinemann's All-German People's Party (Gesamtdeutsche Volkspartei, GVP). Heinemann was a renowned lay leader of the Protestant Church and, after the War, had co-founded the

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CDU and served as Germany's first minister of the interior. He formed the GVP after resigning from the cabinet and leaving the CDU in opposition to Konrad Adenauer's support for Germany's military participation in a West European defense community.

Recent work has warned against the cognitive bias that emerges from reasoning backwards from the safety of knowing an outcome and thus treating past events as having been more predetermined than they actually were (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Møller 2017, 2021). The GVP's result of only 1.2 percent in the 1953 election has made it look like an inevitable political failure, reducing it to hardly more than a footnote in the party politics literature (e.g. Von Alemann 2010).[1] However, the GVP illustrates the importance of "reading history forward" when selecting our cases. In the early 1950s, many CDU leaders and political observers feared the disintegration of Catholics and Protestants into opposing political parties. Catholics supported Western rearmament, whereas many Protestants did not. Protestants also resented Catholics for their insistence on separate confessional schools and for their newly achieved political dominance in post-war Germany. Heinemann's prominence, rootedness in Protestantism, and role as a vocal opponent to rearmament make the GVP's 1953 result more puzzling than a retrospective perspective would suggest.

If the GVP was associated with important societal and political conflicts, why did it not break through? On the one hand, scholars have explained cases of non-breakthrough by pointing to unfavorable contextual conditions (e.g. Backes and Mudde 2000; De Jonge 2020; O'Malley 2008). Studies of successful breakthrough, on the other hand, have highlighted the agency of new or previously minor parties in identifying, shaping, and politicizing issues or positions to attract support (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries 2015; Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; Riker 1986). However, if parties' strategic choices matter, they should not only matter in cases of success

[1] Müller (1990)'s political history is the exception.

but also in cases of failure. Such negative cases, in which opportunities for breakthrough are favorable but breakthrough is absent, are important for theory building and testing (Mahoney and Goertz 2004). This points toward a gap in the literature on political opportunity structure, which usually assumes but does not demonstrate that actors would capitalize on available opportunities (Meyer and Minkoff 2004: 1463-64).

Heinemann and his allies encountered favorable conditions but made strategic choices about *with whom*, *when*, and *how* to build their party that left the GVP with too narrow an appeal to break through. The conflicts between Catholics and Protestants over rearmament and other issues opened up political space that established parties initially did not address. Yet, Heinemann's coalition building alienated potential supporters, his hesitancy to form a party allowed established parties to reduce the available space, and a restrictive membership recruitment strategy undermined the party organizationally and financially. All this left the GVP with too small a base for party breakthrough. Neither the 1953 electoral reform in itself nor the Soviet crackdown of the 1953 East German uprising and its alleged impact on discrediting opposition to rearmament explain the GVP's failure to break through. My analysis relies on archival collections and secondary sources in political science, political history, and church history. I use systematic process tracing, which allows generating internally valid results when the number of competing explanations exceeds the number of cases (Bennett 2010: 180-81).

The article makes three contributions. First, it highlights a historically sensitive approach to selecting negative cases. Second, it underlines the importance of relevant negative cases to assess the effect of new or minor parties' strategic choices on their breakthrough potential. Finally, empirically, it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first study of the GVP in English. I proceed by introducing the case and embedding it within the literature on party breakthrough, whose implications for selecting negative cases I subsequently discuss. The paper then

evidences that Heinemann's and the GVP's choices over coalition building, the timing of party formation, and organization building rather than the contextual opportunities explain the GVP's failure to break through. The last section discusses my findings' implications for the literature on new parties, case selection, and party system development and concludes.

II. The Case of the GVP

Imagine a new democracy. Its first election took place less than a year ago and the resulting coalition government has just a slim majority. The largest party in this coalition is divided along the country's salient cleavages. It has not been constituted as a national party yet and instead consists of relatively autonomous subnational organizations. Legal constraints on the formation of new parties have just been lifted and, being a federal system, the country's subnational elections displayed high levels of volatility. In this context, the minister of the interior, himself from the largest governing party and the leading representative of one of the country's largest cleavage groups, resigns over a dispute on one of the most controversial issues at the time. All else being equal, if this person subsequently decided to form a political party, would we not expect it to have good chances of entering parliament?

This scenario describes well the case of Gustav Heinemann's GVP. Before 1945, Heinemann had been a leading figure in the Confessing Church, a movement opposing the Protestant churches' alignment with the Nazi regime. Following Germany's defeat and partition into occupation zones, he helped form the CDU in North Rhine-Westphalia. While the CDU aspired to integrate Catholic and Protestant Christians, its early years reflected the heightened tensions between both denominations in post-war Germany (Bösch 2001). Heinemann became "*the* representative of Protestant Christians within the CDU", having been elected to the Council of the Evangelical Church (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) in August 1945 and as president of the Church's all-German Synod in 1949 (Klein 2005: 190; emphasis added). He

became mayor of Essen in 1946 before gaining wider recognition as minister of justice in North Rhine-Westphalia and entering Konrad Adenauer's first federal cabinet as minister of the interior (ibid.: 188-94).

Denominational conflicts heightened over the prospects of reunifying the predominantly Protestant East German state with the denominationally balanced West German state. The outbreak of the Korean War in mid-1950 intensified discussions over rearming West Germany as part of a Western defense alliance. This would entrench both German states on opposite sides in the Cold War and thus block reunification in the foreseeable future. The implication of rearmament for German reunification made the issue a focal point in the tensions between Protestants and Catholics (Bösch 2001: 119-20; Hehl 1999: 178; Pearson 2010: 272-73).

When learning that Adenauer had stated his willingness to the Western Allies to provide German troops for a West European army, Heinemann declared his resignation during a cabinet meeting on August 31, 1950 (Schwarz 1995: 547). Heinemann rejected rearmament as a democratically unauthorized act (Adenauer had not consulted the cabinet), a morally wrong decision so soon after World War II, and a threat to peace and national reunification, which could only be achieved through German neutrality (Klein 2005: 196-99; Müller 1990 [chapter 3]). These positions would inspire the GVP's platform (Müller 1990: 258-68).

III. National Party Breakthrough, Political Opportunities, and Strategic Choices

The background of Heinemann and the GVP seems to suggest promising conditions for national party breakthrough. I define national party breakthrough as the first time a party either gains a seat or achieves a specific vote share (e.g. around 5 percent) in a national election (e.g. Bolleyer 2013: 39; Bolleyer and Bytzek 2017: 772; Meguid 2008: 4-5). My understanding of national party breakthrough thus does not include gaining legislative or executive

representation through mergers with or splits from parties in public office because it is likely to result from very different processes (Bolleyer 2013: 26-27).

Studies explaining the success of new or previously minor parties have emphasized the interplay between demand-side, institutional, and supply-side factors, often subsumed as political opportunity structure (POS) (e.g. Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Kitschelt 1988; Meguid 2008). Demand-side factors have focused on why voters might support new parties. This might be the result of changes in a country's enfranchised population (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), the erosion or lack of traditional party-voter linkages (e.g. Dalton 2006; Sikk 2011), or the rise of new issues (e.g. Ignazi 1992; Kitschelt 1988). On the supply-side, when established parties fail to represent voters on relevant issues, provide distinct policy positions, or incorporate them into a coherent program, new parties can ease such "representational strain" (Rohrschneider 2015: 367; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012 [Chapter 2]). Many scholars have seen the breakthrough of new parties as resulting from the failure of parties that have already broken through to address new issues (e.g. Hug 2001; Meguid 2008). Established parties might fail to do so, for example, when these issues risk crosscutting or departing from their traditional electoral coalition (Rohrschneider 2015: 358, 367). Addressing an issue also requires acting upon it in public office (ibid.: 368). If established parties do not do this, new or minor parties can break through even while serving well-known ideological questions (Bolleyer 2013; Lucardie 2000; Sikk 2011). The extent to which established parties might get away with "representational strain" without new party breakthrough also depends on the political system's institutional permissiveness (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 33). Low hurdles to party registration, a proportional electoral system or a plurality system with geographically concentrated electoral support, a low electoral threshold, second-order elections, and a high level of corporatism have been suggested to help new or minor parties to break through (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Birnir 2004; Farrer 2015; Golder 2003; Kitschelt 1988). Party

breakthrough becomes more likely as relevant interest groups refuse to endorse established parties (e.g. Warner 2000). We would thus *expect to see party breakthrough if established parties fail to address important grievances in a political system with a high level of institutional permissiveness*.

However, while the POS approach assumes that new/minor parties will use the space available to them (Figure 1), these parties' strategic choices are an independent factor. Parties need to politicize the issue that established parties have not addressed. Many voters who care about this issue might previously not have voted or voted for different parties given the absence of a better choice (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012 [Chapter 5]). New or minor parties thus need to *build a coalition* in terms of the groups coming together in the new party and framing issues in a way that appeals to a sufficiently large number of voters (Hanley et al. 2008; Hobolt and De Vries 2015; Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Riker 1986; Rovny 2013). Their chances of breakthrough increase if they adopt a position on the issue that differs from those of established parties (Hobolt and De Vries 2015: 1161). Yet, established parties' responses can importantly reduce new or minor parties' prospects (Meguid 2008). They can fail to pick up on (changes in) voters' preferences at *t* but correct this at *t+1* (Abou-Chadi 2016; Hug 2001). *Timing* is thus important. While the time established parties require to respond to public opinion can vary for several reasons (e.g. Kitschelt 1994), taking ownership of an issue (position) before established parties address it can improve new or minor parties' electoral prospects (see Stubager 2018 for a critical review). Moreover, while organizational strength has usually been associated with electoral persistence rather than breakthrough (Art 2011; Bolleyer 2013), *building an organizational infrastructure* is usually important to run a successful campaign (Dinas et al. 2016; Lucardie 2000). Parties' organizational strength is not fully explained by their backing in society since parties decide what organizational forms to adopt and how to recruit members (Przeworski and Sprague 1986: 83-84).

If seizing political opportunities requires appealing to the available electorate, addressing salient conflict lines before established parties do, and building some organizational infrastructure, why would new or minor parties ever fail to do so? While historical ties to organized special interests constrain parties' flexibility, this tends to be a problem for established rather than for new or minor parties and to depend on parties' initial coalition building (Przeworski and Sprague 1986: 115-26). Still, parties might refuse to adopt a platform that risks diluting their ideological identity (Lucardie 2000; Przeworski and Sprague 1986). Internal conflicts might also prevent parties from seizing opportunities (Hanley et al. 2008; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). Regardless of the reasons, we would expect that *if a new or minor party fails to address the available electorate before established parties do, party breakthrough is unlikely*.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. Party breakthrough following the POS model.

IV. Selecting Negative Cases

When seeking to explain party breakthrough, studying negative cases (i.e. cases of non-breakthrough) is important.[2] They facilitate distinguishing between factors, events, and processes that are merely present and those that are crucial to the outcome (Emigh 1997: 357-58). By providing variation on the outcome variable, negative cases have been essential for the correlational analysis in quantitative studies and for evaluating necessity and sufficiency claims in qualitative studies (Golder 2003; Mahoney and Goertz 2004). Even studying a single negative case can thus help develop "the content of theory" (Emigh 1997: 357).

[2] On non-binary outcomes, see Mahoney and Goertz (2004: 653-55).

Yet, many attempts at party breakthrough fail without being academically relevant. Most scholars would probably not find it worthwhile to study why the Magdeburg Garden Party (Magdeburger Gartenpartei) did not overcome Germany's 5 percent threshold in 2017 since the party was only on the ballot for around 3 percent of the electorate. This made breakthrough basically impossible.[3] Moreover, some parties do not even seek election. The neo-fascist party The Right (Die Rechte) was criticized for primarily existing not to contest elections but to provide former members of banned neo-Nazi clubs with the legal protection political parties enjoy under German law (Hüllen n.d.). Such cases would not teach us anything about the effects of agentic, structural, and institutional factors, and, if adding up to a large share of negative relative to positive cases, would actually contribute to under-estimating the probability of breakthrough (King and Zeng, 2001: 146-48; Mahoney and Goertz 2004: 654-56). While there are statistical tools to correct for this problem (King and Zeng 2001), the advice commonly goes against simply including all negative cases (Mahoney and Goertz 2004: 656-57).

Choosing cases based on how close they came to achieving breakthrough (i.e. using election results as a proxy for breakthrough potential) entails the risk of selection bias by selecting on the dependent variable and ignoring "relevant" negative cases.[4] In relevant negative cases, the outcome did not occur but was possible. For example, parties were on the ballot in a sufficient

[3] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point. In the specific example, the Magdeburg Garden Party could have bypassed the threshold by winning three constituency seats in Germany's mixed system. However, only two parties have entered parliament in that way since 1956.

[4] See the discussion in Golder (2003: 435). This does not mean that previous election performance is irrelevant. It can be an important independent variable by signalling competitiveness and generating resources and media attention (Farrer 2015).

number of districts to have a chance at breakthrough. Moreover, values on at least one independent variable would make us expect to observe the outcome (ibid.: 657-58). For example, we might expect a party to break through because there is an unaddressed grievance and the party has leaders whose name recognition or political expertise makes them credible challengers to established parties (e.g. Hanley et al. 2008). Assuming that parties' eventual result would capture their breakthrough potential biases case selection in favor of the POS approach because it risks deselecting cases in which parties failed to capitalize on political opportunities (see Mahoney and Goertz 2004: 656, 668).

The GVP is an often-neglected relevant negative case because values on both POS and internal supply-side variables were conducive to party breakthrough. On the POS side, the loss of Germany's predominantly Protestant eastern territories following World War II and the Adenauer government's course of Western integration intensified anti-Catholic sentiments and opposition to rearmament among many Protestants. Established parties, for various reasons, initially did not address these grievances. On the GVP's side, contemporaries agreed that Heinemann's ecclesiastic and political background put him in a promising position to capitalize on the available space.

The analysis below will assess to what extent changes in the political opportunities or the strategic choices made by Heinemann and his allies explain the GVP's failure to break through. *The POS argument* assumes that new or minor parties would use the opportunities available to them. If this argument explained the GVP's failed breakthrough in 1953, I would expect to observe (changes in) public opinion and established parties' platform to leave the GVP with no political space to capitalize on and/or the available electorate to be too small to break through given (changes in) the institutional environment (e.g. electoral reform). In contrast, *the strategic choice argument* would be supported if public opinion and established parties' platform provided the GVP with a sufficiently large group of voters given the institutional

context but the party failed to appeal to this electorate due to its choices over, for example, its political coalitions, the timing of party formation, or organization building.

Identifying whether agency had an effect on party breakthrough when compared to demand-side, external supply-side, and institutional factors requires fine-grained data to reconstruct the timeline of changes in contextual conditions, key events, and actors' decision-making (Bennett 2010). I assess public grievances, including the size of opposing groups and the importance voters attributed to relevant issues, by using the few surveys available for the early 1950s. I complement this with archival material and secondary sources on grievances at the mass and elite level. To reconstruct the sequence of events, actors' decision-making, and parties' platforms, I conducted research in the Archive for Christian Democratic Policy (ACDP), the Foundation Chancellor Adenauer House (StBKAH), and Germany's Federal Archive (BA). The data includes Heinemann's and other relevant actors' notes and correspondence, minutes of party and cabinet meetings, and campaign and press material.[5] The BA and ACDP also provided online access to additional sources. I also rely on material from the Archive of Social Democracy (AdsD) and smaller Church archives that secondary studies have cited and/or paraphrased (e.g. Klein 2005; Müller 1990). Finally, while the GVP has not attracted much research in comparative politics, I complement the material with studies on political and ecclesiastic history (compare Møller 2020).

My analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I will show that Heinemann initially faced favorable conditions for a new party to break through. Second, between his announced resignation in August 1950 and late 1952, Heinemann made choices that left the GVP with too small a potential support base before other parties notably changed their platform. Germany's 1953

[5] The supplementary material provides further details. Translations are my own.

electoral reform and the development of public opinion (e.g. because of the Soviet crackdown of the East German uprising), on their own, do not explain the GVP's failed breakthrough.

V. The GVP's Political Opportunity

Conflicts between Catholics and Protestants after 1945

Building on a long history in German politics, going back to the Reformation, Thirty Years' War, and Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* (Frøland et al. 2019), conflicts between Catholic and Protestant Christians came again to the forefront by the end of World War II. Prior to 1945, Protestants' majority position and their alignment with conservative state building elites might explain the initial absence of a notable Protestant party, like the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands at that time (Hehl 1999: 172; Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 35-38; Pearson 2010: 277-78). The German Conservative Party and subsequently the German National People's Party mainly represented the Protestant side of the denominational cleavage (Klein 2005: 30-35; Mitchell 2012: 23). The balance between the two denominations, however, changed dramatically in 1945. While Protestants had represented two-thirds of the German population between 1871 and 1945, their share dropped to denominational parity with Germany's post-war partition and territorial losses (Hehl 1999: 167; Sauer 1999: 1-2).

While the Weimar and war experience as well as the compulsory party licensing imposed by the Allies stimulated inter-denominational cooperation (Bösch 2001: 51-53; Mitchell 2012: 39-53, 86; Pearson 2010: 270; Rogers 1995: 123-25), conflicts between Catholics and Protestants quickly remerged. The Catholic majority in the new Adenauer government and its policy of Western integration stimulated fears of Catholic domination among many Protestants (Pearson 2010: 271). Historians have summarized these feelings by referring to Martin Niemöller's interview with the New York Herald Tribune in December 1949 (Bösch 2001: 109; Conway 1992: 833; Mitchell 2012: 187; Sauer 1999: 46-47). The president of the Protestant Church in

Hesse and Nassau saw the West German state as having been "conceived in the Vatican and born in Washington." Its continued existence would entail "the end of European Protestantism" (cited in Sauer 1999: 47). On the ground, clubs and societies split along denominational lines, and letters to Protestant politicians illustrated people's experiences with denominational conflicts (Bösch 2001: 109-10).[6]

The fear of being marginalized in the new state connected to the opposition of many Protestants to West Germany's rearmament. While Catholics quickly rallied behind rearming West Germany as part of a European defense alliance, several Protestant state churches[7] rejected rearmament for jeopardizing peace and the reunification with the majority Protestant population in Soviet-controlled East Germany (Bösch 2001: 119-20). Survey data from September 1951 indicates that 42 percent of people rejected rearmament before the two German states were reunified, and the "Count me out!" (Ohne mich!) movement against rearmament became one of the first post-war social movements (Görtemaker 1999: 189-90; Holl 1988: 223-24; Noelle and Neumann 1975: 359).

Arguments about Protestantism's alleged doctrinal unsuitability for political mobilization are not persuasive. While Martin Luther's doctrine of keeping matters of faith separate from social and political matters might have contributed toward Protestants' submission to state authority before 1933, the experience of the Nazi dictatorship and the War had politicized many Protestant leaders and laymen (Pearson 2010: 273-81). This did not result in support for a Protestant party or political agreement per se. Yet, many Church elites, most visible in Karl

[6] See especially the letters in ACDP-01-369-010/1.

[7] Specifically, Hesse-Nassau, Westphalia, Palatinate, and Rhineland.

Barth's progressive-participatory theology, agreed that it was a Christian's responsibility to participate fully in political life (Klein 2005: 386; Müller 1990: 47-53; Sauer 1999: 34, 41).

Established Parties' Initial Struggle to Address Protestants' Grievances

The CDU aimed to integrate both Catholics and Protestants, but the dominance of Catholics within the party hindered its ability to accommodate Protestant interests. Adenauer's support for Western rearmament engendered suspicions among many Protestants that he might sacrifice reunification for the sake of consolidating Catholic dominance (Bösch 2001: 118-9; Hehl 1999: 177-78; Mitchell 2012: 188).

In contrast to the Catholic Church (Warner 2000: 198-99), the CDU also lacked the unequivocal support of the Protestant Church. The EKD council was divided into a conservative, Lutheran majority and a vocal and left-leaning reformed minority around Niemöller, organized as the Council of Brethren (Bruderrat) (Sauer 1999: 27-44). Anti-party sentiments had traditionally been widespread within both groups, and several meetings between Church, SPD, and CDU representatives failed to generate agreement on whether the Church should forge ties with a political party (Klein 2005 [chapter 12]). The EKD refused to favor the CDU in identifying candidates for the 1949 election and did not express an electoral recommendation beyond encouraging Protestants to vote (ibid.: 446-48). Adenauer's support for rearmament and Heinemann's resignation intensified the Church's internal divisions, even triggering concerns over a potential split (Hehl 1999: 182; Sauer 1999: 42, 87-88). While CDU support was pronounced among Lutheran elites (Bösch 2001: 36; Sauer 1999: 80-104), opposition to Adenauer's rearmament course prevailed, especially at the grassroots level.[8]

[8] See Pearson (2010: 283-85) on the EKD Congress from August 1950 and the EKD Council's declaration from August 27, 1950 cited in Hoeth (2007: 49-50).

While the Church subsequently adopted a neutral position (Pearson 2010: 287; Sauer 1999: 89), it remained divided on the issue well beyond the 1953 election (Conway 1992: 834-35).

After Heinemann's departure from the cabinet, the CDU's vote share collapsed in the state elections in many Protestant areas (Hesse: from 31 to 18.8 percent, Württemberg-Baden: 40.9 to 26.3 percent, Bremen: 22 to 9 percent).[9] While we lack individual-level data, it seems plausible that Protestant voters had distanced themselves from the CDU. "If this development continues," Paul Sethe analyzed for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, "…we would revert to the situation as it had existed until 1933: that the convinced Catholics would gather in a specific party" and "that the convinced Protestants could not get themselves to join them" (Sethe 1950). In hindsight, these fears might seem surprising since the CDU ended up absorbing several rivals until the end of the 1950s (Bösch 2001: 174-94; Kreuzer 2009: 687-92). In the fall of 1950, however, the CDU had only existed for five years and not even been constituted as a national political party.[10] The party's disintegration along denominational lines was a serious possibility for many observers and party elites at that time (Cary 1996: 264; Kaiser 1950; Lehr 1950; Sethe 1950).

Disgruntled Protestants within the CDU substantiated the risk of a denominational split. Virtually all CDU Protestants, including prominent figures like Hermann Ehlers, had backed Heinemann as minister of the interior against Adenauer's initial reluctance (Schwarz 1995: 444). While Ehlers would become a loyal supporter of Adenauer, his loyalty was not certain in

[9] An electoral alliance with the German Party concealed the CDU's difficulties in the 1951 Lower Saxony election (from CDU 19.9 percent and DP 17.9 percent to 23.7 percent for the alliance).

[10] The constituting party congress was scheduled for October 20-22, 1950.

1950 (Jobke 1974: 63). When Adenauer rejected a Soviet and East German initiative in November 1950 to reunify Germany as a neutral state, Ehlers, Robert Tillmanns (deputy leader of the Berlin CDU), and the exiled Christian Democrats from East Germany[11] openly opposed Adenauer at the party council (Volkmann 1988: 185-86). When Adenauer rejected an East German initiative to confer over organizing free elections, opposition was so intense at the party council meeting on 27 September 1951 that Friedrich Holzapfel (deputy CDU leader, Protestant) thought it necessary to state that "Dr Adenauer had *still* the confidence of the CDU" (cited in Volkmann 1988: 190; emphasis added). When Stalin ultimately proposed the reunification of a neutral Germany in March 1952, Adenauer's unwillingness to engage with the proposal again provoked intra-party outcry. Jakob Kaiser, Johann Baptist Gradl, and Ernst Lemmer[12] urged to negotiate with the Soviet Union (Volkmann 1988: 191-201). Against Adenauer's objections, Ehlers even met a delegation from East Germany's legislature in September 1952 (Koch 1972: 347).[13]

Adenauer named the risk of losing the "CDU's Protestant circles" as his "greatest concern" (größte Sorge) (Buchstab 1986: 87). At a leadership meeting in October 1951, he spoke about the SPD's attempts to drive a wedge between the CDU's Protestant and Catholic members, efforts that "thanks to Niemöller and Heinemann" could succeed (ibid.). Recriminations

[11] Between 1945 and 1947, the Soviet Military Administration forced the elected CDU leaders out of office. Many of them moved to West Germany, and the CDU's party statute recognized the "Exil-CDU" as representation of East Germany's Christian Democrats.

[12] All former leaders of the East German CDU. Lemmer was a Protestant. Kaiser and Gradl were Catholic.

[13] There also existed a (small) Protestant opposition to Adenauer's rearmament course in the CSU (i.e. the CDU's Bavarian counterpart; Volkmann 1988: 190-91, 202-4).

between the two denominations occurred frequently at the national and state level. In addition to disagreements over rearmament, Protestants lamented their minority status in the distribution of posts, whereas Catholics complained about Protestants' over-representation when compared to the CDU's membership and electorate (ibid.: 51-52, 56, 60, 70, 75, 95, 163, 542-3). Disagreements over education policies came on top of these conflicts (Bösch 2001: 109-33; Cary 1996: 254-55).

While the remaining parties tried to benefit from anti-Catholic resentments against the CDU (e.g. Bösch 2001: 121), they were ill-equipped to appeal to dissatisfied Protestants. The Liberals' (FDP) emphasis on individualism and materialism invited criticism for being the party of "unbelievers" (Klein 2005: 310). Moreover, as Adenauer's coalition partner, the FDP remained largely on Adenauer's side on rearmament (Jobke 1974: 103; Schwarz 1995: 551). His other coalition partner, the German Party (DP), stood in the tradition of pre-war Protestant Conservatism but emphasized a denominational party brand primarily after the 1953 election. Initially, it feared that denominational campaigns would limit its appeal in South Germany and jeopardize its alliance with the CDU (Klein 2005: 294-95; Meyn 1965: 87). In the early 1950s, monarchist, national-conservative, and increasingly right-wing extremist positions characterized the DP, which courted former NS officials to fight off the rising Socialist Reich Party (Klein 2005: 292-93; Schmollinger 1984: 1029-34). The refugee party (BHE) was non-denominational since refugees were denominationally mixed (Vosskamp 2007: 34, 168-69). Both the DP and BHE supported rearmament (Jobke 1974: 103; Schoenberg 1971: 169-79).

The Social Democrats' (SPD) position was ambiguous. Although the party attracted a large share of Protestant voters before the War, their support was rooted in a class rather than religious identity. "Religious Socialists" only constituted a tiny minority (Klein 2005: 56-58). After 1945, the SPD initially opened up toward the Protestant Church, meeting with Niemöller's group in July 1947 and October 1950. Yet, a subsequent meeting was cancelled,

and the SPD leadership kept henceforth their distance after Niemöller had tried to gain the SPD's support for opposing rearmament (ibid.: 339-41, 414).[14] While the SPD had initially opposed rearmament (Drummond 1982: 37-41; Schwarz 1995: 523), their position changed with the Korean War.[15] The party's grassroots continued to condemn rearmament, and, in state elections, the SPD ran slogans such as "Barracks or Hospitals! CDU or SPD!" and "Vote against remilitarization! Vote for peace, social justice, and freedom. Vote Social Democrats!" (Drummond 1982: 58). However, since a press conference in the fall of 1950, seen as authoritative for the SPD's position (ibid.: 46-47), SPD leader Kurt Schumacher was taking a different position. He demanded a "concentration of military forces on German soil that would make the power and resolution of the Western democracies 'strikingly visible'" (ibid.: 63). His disagreement with Adenauer was one of sequence rather than principle. While Adenauer saw rearmament, national sovereignty, and security as goals that could only be reached simultaneously, the SPD leader wanted an increase in Germany's sovereignty and the Allies' military presence before making any defense contributions (Drummond 1982: 44-47, 52, 64-65; Löwke 1969: 11, 45; Müller 1990: 117-18; Schubert 1970: 42-45, 64-70). Given the divisions between the SPD's leadership and rank-and-file, its position crystalized around calling for new elections to decide the issue of rearmament (Drummond 1982: 58).

[14] Relationships only improved after 1953 (Klein 2005: 345-57).

[15] Compare Drummond (1982 [chapter 2]), Görtemaker (1999: 189-90; 277-79, 309-13), Löwke (1969), Pearson (2010: 273, 286, 291), Schubert (1970: 42-45, 64-70), and Schwarz (1995: 533-51).

Institutional Permissiveness and Electoral Reform

The institutional permissiveness of Germany's political system does not account for the GVP's failure to translate the available space into electoral breakthrough. The end of compulsory party licensing in March 1950 significantly facilitated new party emergence.[16] While the risk of being banned if the Constitutional Court judged a party anti-democratic remained a hurdle to new party entry, this was a concern for the neo-Nazi Socialist Reich Party and the Communist Party (KPD) rather than the GVP (Cary 1996: 269; Müller 1990: 244-57).

Together with the denominational conflicts described above, the widespread opposition to rearmament underlines that there was sufficient potential demand for the GVP to overcome the electoral threshold even after the 1953 electoral reform.[17] Anti-Communism and the fear of a Soviet attack were not enough to discredit the opposition to rearmament (cf. Holl 1988: 224-25; Klein 2005: 269). The Communists also rejected rearmament, and anti-Communism was

[16] The Allies had previously blocked several attempts at party formation and disadvantaged the few smaller parties they licensed (Rogers 1995 [chapter 6]).

[17] When the new law passed on June 25, 1953, two restrictions hit the GVP: 1) the extension of the 5 percent threshold from the state to the federal territory, and 2) the requirement to collect 500 signatures to run in a district. While the GVP successfully sued against the second requirement, the law exposed the GVP's organizational weakness whose origins will be outlined in the main text (Müller 1990: 281-82). Apart from the electoral reform and the end of compulsory party licensing, the only other notable institutional changes included the increase in the size requirements to form a parliamentary caucus and the replacement of the fused with a double ballot. Both changes had negligible effects on party competition (Kreuzer 2009: 685-86).

certainly one of the reasons for a relatively weak Communist Party in West Germany (5.9 percent in 1949). However, opposition to Western rearmament vastly exceeded the Communist vote. By April 1951, 6 million signatures had been collected against rearmament (Holl 1988: 224). Support for German neutrality was wide-spread, ranging from 30 to over 50 percent between 1950 and early 1953.[18] This included 30 percent of people who said in September 1952 that they would want Germany to side neither with the West nor the East even in the case of war (Merritt 1968: 221, 224). Opposition to rearmament remained high, scoring between 14 and 30 percent depending on the survey and question, even after the Soviet Union quelled an East German uprising in June 1953 (Noelle and Neumann 1975: 175; Reigrotzki 2015).

Table 1 shows that rearmament and issues relating to it were also highly salient. While only less or equal to 10 percent of respondents explicitly named rearmament as one of the most important issues, this issue, as outlined above, was inherently linked to the East-West conflict, German reunification, and national sovereignty (Koch 1972: 224; Volkmann 1988: 194-95). More than half of the respondents regarded issues relating to "the German question" as the most important problems, vastly exceeding the share of respondents concerned about the country's economic situation.

[Table 1 here]

While the survey data does not allow disaggregating the results to the subnational level, reports on local protests and return rates of signatures against rearmament indicate that opposition was particularly strong in Protestant and denominationally mixed areas. This especially applied to the areas with a reformed Protestant tradition in North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, and Baden-

[18] See the survey results in Noelle and Neumann (1975: 175, 318, 332, 353, 355, 358, 360-61, 372-73, 377).

Württemberg (Bösch 2001: 120; Dietzfelbinger 1984: 97-150; Koch 1972: 279-80). It is unclear whether the concentration of support would have been sufficient for a party to secure a district seat. Yet, the importance of the PR component in Germany's mixed system and the expansion of the 5 percent threshold from the state to the federal territory meant that the geographical concentration of support played a subordinate role for the GVP's breakthrough potential.[19]

Opposition to rearmament provided a focal point to bring together a broad Protestant coalition. While Protestants had been split into a conservative majority and a liberal and (small) socialist camp before World War II (Klein 2005: 21-57), the opposition to rearmament bridged these old divisions. Ranging from nationalists' anger over the loss of the Prussian heartland to pacifists and the religious minorities in the FDP and SPD, many Protestants rejected Western rearmament for threatening German reunification and peace (Jobke 1974: 116; Klein 2005: 342-45; Mitchell 2012: 101-2; Müller 1990: 121; Pearson 2010: 271). The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* rightly noted in October 1950 that a "politician of passion and temperament" would be able to translate these sentiments into an anti-rearmament movement that neither the government nor the Western Allies could ignore (cited in Koch 1972: 206).

VI. Strategic Choices and the GVP's Missed Opportunities

Coalition Building

However, while Protestant newspapers and local church groups supported Heinemann by publishing his arguments (Koch 1972: 207), Heinemann refused to politicize denominational identities. Reflecting the theological discussions among Church leaders over whether a party could claim the label "Christian" (Klein 2005 [chapter 12]), Heinemann had reservations over

[19] I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this.

instrumentalizing the Christian faith for political purposes (Klein 2005: 203-6, 380-94; Müller 1990: 51-52). In his public appearances, he took great care to separate his political remarks from his position in the EKD (Koch 1972: 236, 274).

Instead, Heinemann tried to build a broad coalition against rearmament, open to both Protestants and Catholics without being explicitly "Christian". In late 1950, Heinemann met with former CDU members Ulrich Noack and Günther Gereke to prepare a public declaration against rearmament (Koch 1972: 236-37). Trying to convince public figures to sign it, he contacted Protestant bishops, the leader of the Catholic Center Party (Helene Wessel), and Protestant elites in the CDU (Hermann Ehlers) and FDP (Edgar Engelhard, Friedrich Middelhauve) (Cary 1996: 264; Müller 1990: 120-21).

Yet, Heinemann's choice of partners did not inspire support for his "Call for Peace". Especially Gereke was a controversial figure. Serving as minister for agriculture in Lower Saxony until mid-1950, the CDU expelled him after meeting with representatives of the East German government (Deutschland-Union-Dienst, 1950; Koch 1972: 236-37). As a result, while Wessel and Engelhard supported Heinemann's initiative, Middelhauve rejected it. Ehlers, despite expressing careful sympathy, wanted to wait and see who else would sign the declaration (Müller 1990: 120-21). This first attempt to build a broad anti-rearmament coalition ended in disaster when Gereke, without Heinemann's approval, published their declaration before well-known centrists had signed. At that stage, the signatories predominantly came from the far left and right, thus discrediting the declaration and causing Heinemann to withdraw his support (Koch 1972: 238-39; Müller 1990: 121).

Ehlers' reluctance to support Heinemann's initiative, despite their shared background in the Confessional Church and, at least in principle, opposition to rearmament, was also influenced by the coalition building within the CDU. While Heinemann presented his views in front of

CDU Protestants, these meetings initially aimed to identify ways to mediate between him and Adenauer (Koch 1972: 173-74). In contrast, Adenauer quickly met with leading Protestants in the CDU, like Ehlers, to secure their loyalty in exchange for placing them in influential public and party offices (Klein 2005: 200-201; Koch 1972: 214; Pearson 2010: 285-86).[20] Adenauer's efforts to divide the Protestant opposition within the CDU was probably helped by a letter sent by Niemöller and 38 Church veterans accusing the government of conspiring with the Americans against the German people (Pearson 2010: 285). At the CDU's constituting congress, Protestant delegates presented a declaration against Niemöller's attacks and in support of Adenauer (Bösch 2001: 124; Klein 2005: 200; Müller 1990: 117). Heinemann, in turn, withdrew from attending the party congress, criticizing Adenauer for overloading the agenda to render a discussion impossible (Koch 1972: 204). Adenauer and his supporters continued their strategy of reaching out to CDU Protestants, while Heinemann, focusing on building an inter-denominational movement, convinced only few defectors to join him (Bösch 2001: 126; Koch 1972: 321, 346-47; 381).

Moreover, while building a broad support coalition benefits from downplaying issues that could cause frictions (Rovny 2013), Heinemann alienated potential supporters by specifying his left-right position. His roots in the left-leaning minority faction of the Protestant Church distinguished Heinemann from conservative Protestants (Klein 2005: 188-89). While Adenauer managed to integrate diverse interests by being vague on divisive issues (Bösch 2001), Heinemann outlined and justified his views (Müller 1990). He emphasized the moral basis for his opposition to rearmament, questioning whether Christians should take up arms again so soon after "God's judgment" had taken them away (cited in Klein 2005: 197-98). This helped

[20] Hermann Ehlers became Speaker of Parliament, Robert Lehr Heinemann's successor as minister of the interior, and Friedrich Holzapfel deputy party leader.

Adenauer to (unjustifiably) discredit Heinemann as a pacifist, which was at odds with many conservative Protestants' values (Bösch 2001: 122, 125; Koch 1972: 192-200). Moreover, when Heinemann expressed support for a new, non-Catholic party, he specified that this party could bring together Protestants and Socialists (dpa 1950). This resonated with left-leaning Protestants, who would constitute the GVP's main base (Jobke 1974: 131-35, 142-3; Müller 1990: 130-32, 252, 321). However, this group on its own was too small for the GVP to break through, while Heinemann's left-leaning positioning triggered angry reactions from conservative Protestants (Klein 2005: 203). Failing to build a bridge to the EKD's conservative wing, Heinemann prevented any chance for the GVP to build on the Protestant side what the CDU had built on the Catholic side in terms of a party-church alliance (Koch 1972: 296-99, 352-74; Warner 2000 [chapter 9]).

Timing

Heinemann also waited with his political actions until his opponents had closed the previously available space. He allowed Adenauer to wait for six weeks until accepting his resignation.[21] During this time, Adenauer gathered information on Heinemann's backing and reached out to CDU Protestants.[22] Moreover, despite repeated calls by supporters and even the influential weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* to form a new party (e.g. Koch 1972: 268-69; 328-29; Müller 1990: 119), Heinemann stayed in the CDU for two more years. Instead, he formed an interest

[21] See the correspondence between Heinemann and Adenauer and Adenauer's notes of a meeting with Heinemann in September 1950 (Bundesarchiv online 1950: doc. 20, 28, 36, 39, 53).

[22] See the note by Heinemann's secretary and Adenauer's and his assistant Ernst Wirmer's notes and correspondence with Heinrich von Brentano, Ernst Molis, Robert Lehr, and Niemöller's office (Bundesarchiv online 1950: document 34, 42, 43, 44, 55, 60, 62, 63).

group on 21 November 1951, called the "Emergency Community for the Peace in Europe" (Notgemeinschaft für den Frieden Europas, NG) (Müller 1990: 115-29). Heinemann considered this a more effective strategy to stop rearmament than forming a new party since the ratification of the relevant treaties and legislation was expected to take place before the next federal election (Jobke 1974: 84-86). However, it also meant that other parties rather than the Heinemann movement benefited from the CDU's collapse in the state elections in many Protestant areas between 1950 and 1952 (Bösch 2001: 96-108). Heinemann even discussed the possibility of receiving a secure place on the CDU list for the 1953 election (Heinemann 1952b; Simpfendörfer 1952a, 1953). Only when Adenauer wanted to postpone this discussion until after the Bundestag had ratified the European Defense Community and thus German rearmament, Heinemann left the CDU and formed the GVP in November 1952 (Adenauer 1952; Heinemann 1952a; Kaiser 1951; Simpfendörfer 1952b). By that time, however, pro-Adenauer CDU Protestants had already organized the Protestant Working Circle (Evangelische Arbeitskreis, EAK) to mobilize Protestant support (Bach 1951a, 1951b; EAK 1952). During the 1953 campaign, the EAK operated as an "anti-GVP association" (Müller 1990: 270), closely monitoring the GVP's efforts and organizing countercampaigns (Blumenfeld, 1953; EAK 1953).

The GVP only switched to politicizing Protestants' anti-Catholic resentments after Heinemann and his allies had emphasized for more than a year that they were not a Protestant movement. Initially, they portrayed the NG and GVP as an alternative for Catholics and Protestants who rejected rearmament and were dissatisfied with the existing political parties (Cary 1996: 268-70; Heinemann 1953a, 1953b; Klein 2005: 266, 275-76; Müller 1990: 134-35, 251-52). Only later in 1953, the GVP appealed to anti-Catholic sentiments, as one of its flyers illustrates ("Thus, no Protestant vote for the few and unsympathetic Protestant henchmen of political Catholicism! No Protestant vote for the Catholic CDU!"; cited in Ehlers' (1953) letter to

Heinemann). Starting as an inter-denominational organization before embracing denominational politics very likely undermined the GVP's credibility as the defender of Protestant interests.

Heinemann also only abandoned his reservations against party formation when opposing rearmament was no longer a unique selling point. Already when forming the Emergency Community for the Peace in Europe (NG), Heinemann had waited for a year before suddenly rushing forward (Klein 2005: 264-69; Müller 1990: 129-30). A similar hesitancy characterized his decision-making when forming the GVP, which was further complicated by divisions among the NG leaders (Müller 1990: 149-51, 220-35). As a result, the GVP only formed when the SPD's position on rearmament had changed dramatically. After having publicly condemned one of its MPs for making similar arguments just four months earlier, the SPD started opposing rearmament in February 1952 for the threat it posed to German reunification (Schubert 1970: 72-73). When the GVP formed in November 1952, the SPD had already established itself as the main opposing voice to Adenauer's rearmament course at a time when political developments drew additional attention to the issue (Cary 1996: 268-69; Müller 1990: 271).[23]

If the GVP had taken ownership of opposition to rearmament before the SPD did, its electoral prospects would have likely been better. Meguid's (2008: 34-35, 58) work suggests that the SPD's ambiguity on the issue and relatively late shift toward opposing rearmament in combination with the CDU's consistent and vocal support for rearmament[24] would have

[23] Following the signing of the European Defence Community in May 1952, it entered the national parliaments for ratification. In addition, the Soviet notes starting in March 1952 stimulated discussions over alternative routes to German reunification.

[24] See Adenauer's passionate defence of the EDC during the treaty's second reading (Deutscher Bundestag 1952: 1132-44).

strengthened the issue's salience, the GVP's status as anti-rearmament party, and consequently the GVP's electoral support. The GVP was initially well known for a new party. When asked in December 1952, 31 percent of people said that they had heard about the GVP and 13 percent were even able to name its leaders (Noelle and Neumann 1975: 271). Yet, when asked in a later survey which party could prevent Germany from being dragged into another war and achieve German reunification, 24 and 18 percent of respondents respectively named the SPD, in contrast to only two percent for the GVP (ibid.: 255).

Organization Building

Heinemann and his allies also made choices that undermined the GVP's prospects organizationally and financially. To be clear, the GVP built an organization that made electoral breakthrough possible. By the time of the 1953 election, it had an organization (*Landesverband*) in all federal states and a local party group (*Kreisverband*) in 232 out of 242 constituencies. The GVP ran candidates in 232 of the 242 district races and a list in all federal states (including 211 candidates) (Heimann 1984: 1493, 1498). In terms of being available to voters, the GVP thus surpassed the DP, which still entered parliament despite not filing a candidate in 35 districts and withdrawing in an additional 18 districts.[25] Moreover, the GVP's leadership could rely on executive and legislative experience. It included a former cabinet minister (Heinemann), party leader (Wessel), party secretary (Wilhelm Hermes), and former

[25] The DP withdrew in 18 districts as part of an alliance with the CDU. This alliance was not necessary for the DP's (re-)entry into parliament. It won 7 of its 15 district mandates without CDU support, which sufficed to bypass the electoral threshold (Bundeswahlleiter 2018; Schmollinger 1984: 1035; Schröder 2013).

mayor (Robert Scholl). Wessel and five additional members of the GVP's leadership board also were or had been members of parliament (Jobke 1974: 121; Müller 1990: 246).

The GVP initially encountered decent conditions to recruit a large membership. When the NG formed and started collecting signatures for a petition against rearmament, its early weeks indicated a notable momentum. In the city of Tübingen, for example, around a third of the population signed its petition, and the NG's headquarters struggled to keep up with the numerous signatures and speaking requests for Heinemann (Koch 1972: 279). While the Adenauer government and its supporters tried to sabotage Heinemann's efforts to collect funds and put pressure on donors and journalists to not support him, several influential regional and national newspapers initially supported Heinemann's activities (ibid.: 325-26, 380-82).

However, the leadership around Heinemann and Wessel imposed restrictions on who could join their movement, thereby blocking the chance to build a large membership. Aiming to prevent an influx of far-right and –left forces, the NG's statute basically constrained membership to its ten founding members. The NG's leadership had to unanimously accept any new member and grant written permission to local groups wishing to speak on the organization's behalf (Jobke 1974: 88-89). Membership recruitment primarily depended on the initiative of local actors (ibid.: 90). With few local activists, the NG only collected around 148,000 signatures for its petition, and when the NG was transformed into the GVP, there was no mass membership to build on (Jobke 1974: 87; Müller 1990: 148-49). By June 1953, the GVP's membership did not exceed 1,500 members, based on the number of subscriptions to its newspaper. It probably did not help that the GVP required prospective members to submit a declaration that they had not been part of any unconstitutional organization after 1949 (a restriction other parties did not impose) (Heimann 1984: 1498-99, 1503).

Since its potential donor pool consisted of religious associations and small businesses, the lack of members limited the party's financial maneuverability (Jobke 1974: 125). The GVP was unable to print its publications at a scale that allowed maintaining ties with a large number of voters. While the GVP had established branches in all states by July 1953, its name recognition had dropped markedly and the number of local party groups did not yet exceed 170 (Heimann 1984: 1498; Jobke 1974: 122-23; Koch 1972: 380, 407).

Efforts to resolve this weakness by forming electoral alliances with the SPD, DP, and FDP failed (Müller 1990: 280-81). The GVP had alienated many conservative Protestants, allowed the SPD to assume the role of anti-rearmament party, and the FDP and DP were Adenauer's coalition partners. They had no incentive to support the GVP. The GVP's efforts to cooperate with other small parties only increased its internal heterogeneity without adding much to its strength (ibid.: 272-80). The marginal position the GVP leadership had maneuvered the party in ultimately pushed them into the fateful alliance with the League of Germans (Bund der Deutschen, BdD) (ibid.: 286-95).

While helping redress the GVP's organizational weakness, the BdD openly accepted Communists and attracted attention for its "private diplomacy" with the East German government (Cary 1996: 270-71; Müller 1990: 283-86, 295). Being associated with Communist support, especially so shortly after the uprising of June 1953, further marginalized the GVP. When news broke accusing the BdD of being financed by the East German regime, the party was completely discredited (Müller 1990: 297-301, 316-20). Anti-Communism mattered at this stage, and the GVP had reached this stage as a result of its leaders' strategic decisions. While it is hard to say whether the GVP would have entered the Bundestag in September 1953 without this series of political mistakes, it seems fair to conclude that its chances would have been significantly better had they made different choices. Figure 2 summarizes my findings.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. The GVP's failed breakthrough.

VII. Discussion and Conclusion

The failure of the GVP is an important and previously under-explored episode in the development of post-war German politics. Prominent accounts have attributed the swift consolidation of Germany's 2.5-party system to the Allies' party licensing, which gave some parties a head start, and the political institutions and alliances these first movers devised (Kreuzer 2009; Loewenberg 1971; Rogers 1995). This article has added to this scholarship by highlighting the impact minor parties' decisions had during the tumultuous early 1950s. Gustav Heinemann's resignation in the fall of 1950 sparked fears among political elites and observers that the CDU's attempt to integrate both Protestants and Catholics was doomed and the Federal Republic would see a similarly fragmented center and center-right as Weimar. The choices Heinemann and his allies made rather than the development of public opinion, established parties' platform, and political institutions explain why the GVP failed to break through in 1953.

To what extent can the findings of this study inform research beyond the context of 1950s Germany? We must not stretch the inferential leverage we gain from a single case. Yet, the presented analysis entails insights that have implications for research beyond this paper's specific empirical motivation.

Accounts of party breakthrough gain from appreciating the extent to which new or minor parties forge their own destiny. Considering public grievances, established parties' positions, and a political system's institutional permissiveness are important to understand parties' opportunities for electoral breakthrough. However, political opportunities are only what actors make of them. While political entrepreneurs can improve their electoral prospects (Hobolt and

De Vries 2015; Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; Riker 1986), new or minor parties' actions can also waste a favorable political opportunity structure. While the GVP had a real chance to break through, Heinemann's strategic choices over coalition building, the timing of party formation, and organization building maneuvered the GVP into a marginal position. Coalition building, timing, and organization building plausibly influence new parties' prospects beyond 1950s Germany.

The GVP's failed breakthrough also teaches us something about party system development. Especially in the first elections after transition, democracies face the challenge of integrating diverse interests within the new political system. Some parties succeed in appealing to a wide range of groups, thus contributing toward comparatively low levels of party system fragmentation, while others do not (e.g. Hanley et al. 2008). When seeking to explain such differences, neglecting the actions by rival parties risks over-emphasizing variables like the electoral system. While Germany's CDU became the seminal example of Kirchheimer's catch-all party, Heinemann's GVP emerged when the CDU had suffered significant losses in Protestant areas. CDU leaders feared that if Heinemann directly targeted Protestant voters, the CDU's efforts to accommodate Protestants within the party would take an important, potentially decisive setback. Heinemann's tactical errors helped Adenauer and the CDU to prevent the resurgence of a fragmented center-right.

The GVP also offers insights on the role of religion during democratic consolidation by reflecting the process through which German Protestantism came to terms with the post-war realities. The GVP's trajectory from a group that wanted to stay out of party politics toward an uneasy acceptance of parties as the basis of political decision-making and the eventual acceptance of Germany's post-war party system resembles the Church's own development after 1945 (Klein 2005 [chapter 11]). After the 1953 election, many leading GVP figures, including Heinemann, and numerous Protestant pastors found a new home in the SPD. They

contributed to the party's transformation from a Marxist labor-based party to a moderate center-left and governing party, assuming positions as cabinet ministers and even the Federal Presidency (Klein 2005: 345-57; Müller 1990: 378-400; Sauer 1999: 45). The GVP's failure might thus have been a long-term success in integrating Protestants into the new political system.

Methodologically, my findings highlight the importance of a historical approach to case selection. This project did not start by looking at the GVP's result of 1.2 percent in 1953 and asking why this particular party failed. Instead, Herbert Butterfield (1959 [1931]: 16) urged historical scholars, "Real historical understanding is not achieved by the subordination of the past to the present, but rather by our making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century than our own." The more I studied the grievances, institutions, and party platforms in the early 1950s, the more puzzled I was that the GVP did not break through and attracted so little attention in political science. The GVP leadership's religious and political background and established parties' difficulties in addressing the salient denominational conflicts made the GVP's failed breakthrough surprising. A case selection strategy based on a party's eventual election result or the snapshot of previous electoral performances would have most likely missed the GVP. My analysis highlights the importance of "reading history forward" when selecting our cases. The emphasis on case selection is an important addition to political science's "historical turn", which has mainly focused on periodization, concept formation, and collecting suitable data to test competing explanations (e.g. Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Kreuzer 2009; Møller 2017; 2021).

A potential but erroneous objection to a historical perspective on case selection might be that it would not matter if we missed cases like the GVP. Negative cases are important for valid inference (e.g. Emigh 1997). The abundance of cases that do not display a particular outcome can be a curse rather than a blessing (Mahoney and Goertz 2004). The size and obscurity of

many new or minor parties can significantly complicate collecting data on all relevant variables, thus being a burden on researchers' time and resources. Moreover, as outlined in Section IV, some parties might not even primarily exist to compete in elections. Previous scholarship has thus formulated criteria for selecting negative cases, which have focused on the value of potential explanatory variables (ibid.). My article speaks to the case selection literature by advocating a historical perspective when deciding upon the *moment in time* for which we collect data on these variables. Tracing public opinion, established parties' positions, and institutional developments toward election day is better than reasoning backwards from parties' eventual result or looking at snapshots of previous performances.

A second similarly erroneous opposing view might acknowledge that negative cases like the GVP are important but uncovering them would be too resource-intense. While reconstructing public opinion and the development of party platforms for 1950s Germany did require in-depth historical work, data on public opinion, party positions, and institutional variables are usually readily available for contemporary cases. Building on these data sources, we can easily watch out for breaks or major changes in people's political views or a political system's institutional permissiveness without a corresponding shift in established parties' platforms, which would indicate space for party breakthrough.

The risk of missing such an insightful case underlines the importance of "reading history forward" when selecting our cases and to give parties' strategic choices their due role in accounts of both successful and failed party breakthrough.

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Table 1: “What do you think is the most important question that should generally be dealt with in West Germany today?” (open question).

	Oct 1951 %	Jul 1952 %	Aug 1953 %
Economic problems, improving economic situation	45	33	25
“The German question”	*52*	*61*	*56*
Achieving German reunification	18	23	38
Protecting peace, resolving East-West conflict	20	24	12
Rearmament	9	10	3
Peace treaty, national sovereignty, end of occupation	5	4	3
Other responses	12	17	26
No response	5	5	6
SUM	114	116	113

Source: Noelle and Neumann (1975: 392).

Note: Adapted and reprinted with permission.

Figure 1. Party breakthrough following the POS model.

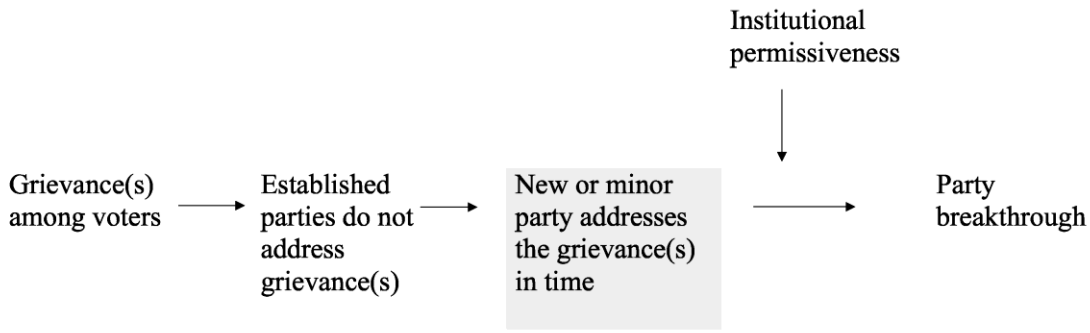

Figure 2. The GVP's failed breakthrough.