Parties are especially important to women’s parliamentary presence in Germany because among the German Volksparteien, the traditional route to the Bundestag leads directly through the party hierarchy. Diligent duty to the party through a succession of party offices for several years—aptly named by party activists as the Ochsentour, or “working like an ox”—is prerequisite to parliamentary office (Kolinsky, 1991). This process made it difficult for women, who often shouldered additional family responsibilities, to dedicate so many years of service to the party organization (Kolinsky, 1993). Further, because women often viewed the party organization as a male domain, they did not participate at the same levels as men (Kolinsky, 1993). The situation appeared dire in the late 1970s, and Hall (1981) wrote, “West German politics is populated by men; women appear as isolated individuals with little influence and lacking the presence of other women, able to affect little changes only with support of their male colleagues” (176). Yet the situation has changed dramatically in recent years, and greater numbers of women have reached the top echelons of the German parties.

Women’s presence in the Bundestag underwent a sea change since the mid-1980s. Figure 6.1 displays the trends in the percentage women in the Bundestag from 1969 to 2002. German women began the 1970s with a presence
of only 6% in parliament. Between 1983 and 1987, the proportion of women in parliament from the three major parties—SPD, FDP, and CDU/CSU—nearly doubled. Women made steady and significant gains throughout the 1990s, ending up composing nearly a third of the Bundestag by 2002.

Why did German women make such strides in the 1980s and into the 1990s? This chapter shows increases have resulted from German women’s intensified efforts within political parties; the chapter also illustrates women’s recognition of the strategic importance of joining forces with the powerful party leadership. Further, women heightened their efforts at an opportune point in time—with the fault lines in voting patterns shifting, party competition heating up, and parties in search of loyal bases of support.

The German case offers a unique feature, the unification of the East and West in 1990. In the East, one-third of the members of the national legislature were women, yet this high level of numerical representation did not reflect a more fundamental change in the political culture as it did in the West. Kollin-sky (1993) writes that “unification revealed that the presumed advantage of women in the East was in reality a disadvantage: an agenda of hidden inequalities and state administered discrimination had short-changed East German women of their opportunities” (113). Thus, although the West and the East

![Figure 6.1 German Women in the Bundestag, 1969–2002](source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997), updated with data from www.ipu.org.)
were shaped by very different political forces in the postwar period, women in both countries suffered barriers to full participation. In each case, fundamental change within the party channels was necessary to increase women’s parliamentary presence.

The German Women’s Movement

Although German women had won the right to vote and run for office under the Weimar Republic in 1918, the proportion of women in the Bundestag remained below 10% until the mid-1980s. It was not until the women’s movement upped its energies in the electoral arena that women’s presence in the Bundestag began to increase. The second wave of the West German women’s movement was sparked by a growing concern over the issue of abortion, which eventually led to demonstrations and to the formation of several women’s organizations and groups (Kaplan, 1992; Rueschemeyer, 1998). Growing out of the student movement, the German women’s movement launched its first coordinated campaign in 1970 (Randall, 1982). Similar to the movement in Britain, the German women’s movement is characterized by its radical nature and by a historical penchant to remain autonomous from mainstream institutions such as political parties (Katzenstein and Mueller, 1987; Kaplan, 1992; Rueschemeyer, 1998). Yet in contrast to the British movement, feminists held weaker bonds with the Socialists. In Germany, women’s concerns were not as well represented among the “Old Left” (Randall, 1982; Davis, 1997).

While many women sought to keep the movement completely autonomous from conventional political channels, by the 1970s an increasing number of women had entered party politics as activists and party members (Rueschemeyer, 1998). In 1976 the German Women’s Council launched a campaign called “Vote for Women” and circulated this message in a young women’s magazine called Brigitte. In 1980 another campaign, entitled “More Women in the Parliaments,” was launched (Hall, 1981). Women across the parties emphasized their numerical underrepresentation, rather than focusing on “women’s issues” per se. Across the system, the number of women in the highest party echelons, including the Bundestag, became a more general symbol of the party’s commitment to women’s equality (Kolinsky, 1993). As a consequence, the three most electorally successful parties in the German system, including the two Volksparteien—the Social Democrats (SPD) and the more conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—and the shifting coalition partner, the Liberal party (FDP), responded, to varying degrees, to women’s demands for greater representation.
Political Background

The German governmental structure is parliamentarian, yet it differs from the British system in its federal structure. In addition to the national parliament, the Bundestag, the regional parliaments play a key role in policymaking. The electoral rules offer district representation and proportionality among parties. Researchers often refer to the German system as a mixed-member proportional system (MMP). There are two ballots, one in which a voter casts a ballot for an individual representative ("erstimme"), and one in which the voter casts a vote for the political party ("zweitstimme"). Seats are first awarded to those individual candidates who won their districts, and then additional seats are awarded to parties on the basis of the second ballot outcome, in order to make the party’s share of seats proportional to its share of votes. Thus, the outcome is “identical to that of straight nation-wide allocation” (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989: 130). Constituency candidates are selected by the local party organizations, and the party lists are composed at the regional level. The constituency candidates tend to be more powerful within the party. Women historically gained fewer constituency nominations than positions on the party lists, where parties can balance among different interest groups. Yet women were often placed low on the party lists because constituency candidates are often placed first (Hall, 1981).

In German politics, the parties play the dominant role in the democratic process (Dalton, 1993a; Wildenmann, 1987). Relative to the British party system, the German system offers to voters a greater selection of parties. There are four major parties that span the ideological spectrum from left to right: the Alliance 90 (the Greens),1 the Social Democrats (SPD), the Free Democrats (FDP), and the Christian Democratic/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU).2 Through the early 1980s, the SPD and CDU/CSU dominated, with the smaller FDP acting as a coalition partner in most governments. At that time, the established parties drew their support mainly from economic and religious interests, the SPD from the working class, and the CDU/CSU from middle-class and religious voters. Yet it is important to note that since the mid-1960s, the major parties, and especially the CDU/CSU, had been true “Volksparteien,” or people’s parties, which are less programmatic and more oriented toward capturing a broad spectrum of voters (Dalton, 1996; Kolinsky, 1993). The Greens’ entrance in 1983 brought new issues to the German political agenda. The Greens emphasized issues such as the environment, nuclear disarmament, and women’s rights—all issues with no clear fit into the existing partisan alignment (Dalton, 1996). German unification further altered the traditional party alignments. The CDU/CSU drew support from the middle class in the West, and the PDS from the working class in the East (Dalton and Cole, 1993).
German Women’s Voting Patterns and Parliamentary Presence

A majority of German women consistently voted for the Christian Democrats (CDU) in the 1950s and 1960s—the “traditional” gender gap. Yet by the 1970s, many women had moved left, toward the SPD (Kolinsky, 1989; 1993). As the SPD moved toward the center of the ideological spectrum in the wake of the Godesberg program, more women came to view the SPD as a viable alternative to the CDU. The SPD’s march toward the Center continued into the late 1990s with Schroeder’s “Neue Mitte,” or new middle approach, much like Blair’s “New Labour” (Cole, 2002). Herbert Kitschelt (1999) points out that this turn away from traditional, class-based leftist politics characterizes social democratic parties in general as they search for new groups of support. By the mid-1970s, women’s voting patterns became increasingly volatile, and young women increasingly joined the SPD as part of a new constituency. In the immediate aftermath of unification, the CDU enjoyed an advantage among East German women, but slowly lost this advantage to parties of the Left (Rueschemeyer, 1998).

Perhaps this shift in women’s voting behavior parallels women’s gains in the Bundestag. Figure 6.2 investigates this relationship by tracing the gender gap in women’s votes and the percentage of Social Democratic and Green Party women in the Bundestag from 1970 to 1998. I measure the gender gap as the percentage of women who intend to vote for the Social Democrats or

Figure 6.2 German Trends in the Gender Vote Gap and Women MPs from Leftist Parties, 1970–98

Greens (the Left), minus the percentage of men who intend to do the same. The higher the vote gap line reaches, the better the SPD is faring among women voters. One can observe steady gains both in support for the Left and in women’s parliamentary presence. Since the early 1970s, the gap in favor of the CDU has diminished, and the SPD and the Greens have enjoyed a slight benefit since the early 1990s. The increase in support for leftist parties began in the 1970s, and increases in women’s parliamentary representation among those leftist parties followed in the late 1980s. Although these two trends appear related, certainly one must be careful to avoid inferring causality.

Values and Party Preferences

Rather than simply gender, it may be that those who support the women’s movement are even more likely to vote for the Social Democrats. As in the analysis of Britain in chapter 5, I measure support for the women’s movement. Figure 6.3 displays the trends in the Left vote among those who support the women’s movement, similar to the analysis of voter support in the previous section. In addition, the trends in women MPs from the leftist parties are graphed as well, for comparison. The graph shows that the percent Left vote among those who support the women’s movement grows evenly over each time point. Mirroring this steady increase is the growth of women MPs from leftist parties. As compared with the British trends, the earlier rise in
support for the German women’s movement on the Left is paired with an ear-
lier rise in levels of women’s representation among those leftist parties. The
increases in representation take off in 1987, after the largest increase in sup-
port for the movement.

**Party-Level Forces for Increasing Women in the Bundestag**

Certainly mass-level forces underpin women’s gains in the Bundestag through
shifting voting patterns and support for an increasingly mainstream women’s
movement. Yet just as in the British case, a closer look at the direct party-level
mechanism behind women’s gains gives us a more focused picture.

**Party Competition**

Although the CDU/CSU lost and SPD gained women’s votes, neither party
automatically responded to women’s demands for greater representation. It
was not until many young women shifted their votes to the Green Party in the
early 1980s that SPD officials began to take serious notice of women as a spe-
cific constituency. Officials from the SPD cite the Green Party as playing an
integral role in sparking greater competition for women’s votes. As the Greens
gathered strength in the early 1980s, they emphasized women’s equal repre-
sentation by mandating 50% women in party offices and in parliament. In the
early 1980s, the Green electorate remained predominantly male. However,
with the jump in the proportion of Green Party women in the Bundestag,
many young women who had previously voted for the SPD shifted their loy-
ty to the Greens. The unprecedented number of women in the Greens’ par-
liamentary delegation set a new benchmark for women’s expectations, and
their success in gaining young female voters triggered a response from rival
parties (Kolinsky, 1989; 1993).

In an attempt to regain the votes they lost, the SPD sought to promote
women candidates for office, though intraparty opposition held up direct
action for one election cycle. By the 1994 election, the SPD featured women
MPs in their media campaign to project a progressive image and to persuade
female voters that the SPD placed highest priority on women’s interests.

Under pressure from Green and SPD efforts, other parties across the ideo-
logical spectrum attempted to show their support for women. The FDP and the
CDU both pledged to increase the number of women in office throughout the
1980s. In interviews, CDU leaders revealed that the party had dismissed the
loss of young women voters to the SPD in the 1980s by predicting that these
women would return to the party later in life, after their life experiences led them away from the Left. Yet after a decade, CDU leaders realized that young women were not reverting back to the party fold over the course of their lives, as the leaders had once expected. Consequently, the CDU leadership took greater initiative to cater to women voters, especially by offering conservative professional women for office.

Women in the Party Hierarchy: Strategy in Intraparty Alignments

Certainly women have not been passive recipients of party concessions by way of electoral forces. As more women have become active in German party politics since the 1970s, women have acted as agents on their own behalf, pressing for gains within the party hierarchy and in the Bundestag. The following section details women’s efforts with the SPD, FDP, and CDU from the 1970s through the 1990s.

Social Democrats (SPD)

Of the German parties, the SPD gained the largest influx of women members during the 1970s and 1980s. Women’s membership in the SPD rose from 17% in the early 1970s to nearly 30% in the early 1990s, where it remained through 1998 (Kolinsky, 1989, 1993; Rueschemeyer, 1998). As more women joined the SPD, they became increasingly active and wanted to hold office. While women made up about 25% of the SPD’s membership in 1983, they accounted for only 15% of the party’s national executive committee (NEC) over the same period (Lovenduski, 1986: 150). In 1972, the proportion of women in the SPD’s delegation to the Bundestag hit rock bottom (5%), which marks a turning point for Social Democratic women. Although SPD women consistently gained nomination to the party lists, their low position on the rank order of those lists meant that few women were elected to office.

At this time, the SPD’s women’s organization (ASF) shifted from simply toeing the party line toward voicing greater demands for women’s equality. At the 1971 party congress, ASF women won the right to vote for their own officials (Hall, 1981). Increasingly active by 1972, the ASF lobbied the NEC for a greater voice. In 1975, the women’s organization got a commitment in the party program for sex equality, but it proved largely rhetorical (Lovenduski, 1986). In 1977 the ASF officially demanded quotas (Rueschemeyer, 1998). After the 1977 party congress, a working group called the “Commission for Equality” was set up to look at the problem of women’s underrepresentation (Hall, 1981). Leader Willy Brandt not only offered to launch the commission, but also to co-chair it with Elfriede Hofmann, a longtime SPD activist (Kolins-
sky, 1989). Women from the ASF supplied half of the members to the commission. Yet to the ASF’s chagrin, the commission produced a 1978 report that yielded no concrete measures, and women continued to lobby (Hall, 1981).

The ASF’s strategy within the party strengthened its efforts to promote women. One key difference between the British Labour Party’s women’s organization and the German SPD’s ASF is that the ASF had fewer links to outside women’s organizations. The larger German women’s movement’s greater reluctance to align with a Socialist party, or with party politics in general, precluded strong ties to outside groups that could support those on the inside. Counterintuitively, the lack of strong ties to the more radical, outside-the-mainstream feminist movement may have led to the earlier advances by party women in the SPD, relative to Labour. As discussed in the previous chapter, the radical nature of Labour’s women’s organization through the mid-1980s precluded its alignment with the more moderate and increasingly powerful faction of the party. In contrast, the women in the SPD were free to align themselves with the dominant centrist party coalition, and this alignment, coupled with the electoral pressures, proved a powerful combination for women’s advancement within the party. Important alignments with the central party leadership led the central party to encourage the regional party organizations to promote women within the party. Because the regional power holders were reluctant to give up entrenched positions, the central party leadership needed to launch a coordinated top-down effort to spark real changes for women in the SPD.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new generation of young women activists joined the SPD and met great disappointment as their high aspirations and hard work failed to win them promotions within the party (Kolinsky, 1991). Unmet expectations brought renewed efforts for sweeping changes to the party organizations. Traditionally, women in the SPD followed a distinct “women’s track” within the party, working within the special women’s section (established in the 1890s). The women’s organization effectively separated women from the party’s mainstream, the center of decision making.

The new group of young women professionals disliked the isolation and protective nature of this separate track, and they insisted the party lift its policy to send four women to special women’s seats on the national executive committee (Kolinsky, 1989). Interviews with former party activists revealed that these young women activists reasoned that these de facto members of the NEC had no real decision-making power, and they desired a real say in party policymaking. However, these young women were shocked when women gained only two seats in the next (1976) election for the NEC. This loss of power sparked reenergized efforts to increase women’s representation, and the SPD became the first party in the German system to move women’s underrepresentation to the main party agenda.
At a succession of party congresses in the mid-1980s, the SPD passed a series of resolutions designed to assist women to gain prominence in the party and seats in the Bundestag. Paralleling each decision, the proportion of women among the party's higher ranks grew. In 1984, the Social Democratic leadership pledged its support to promote women within the party and requested regular reports on the state of women's equality at all levels within the party. In a propaganda move, the SPD placed its women candidates in the front row of pictures in party election posters (Lovenduski, 1986). In 1985, the party instructed the district and regional parties to give preference to women in the nomination process. The ASF continued to pressure the party leadership through the equality commission, stating in a 1986 party document, "To grant women full equality within its ranks has now become a question of credibility for the SPD . . ." (Kolinsky, 1993: Appendix). By 1986, the party finally agreed upon the necessity of direct mechanisms to increase women's presence (Kolinsky, 1989).

As detailed in the previous section, the final straw that broke the SPD's back was the Green Party's success among young women voters (Kolinsky, 1989; 1993). Finally, after ten years of challenging the SPD, in 1987 SPD women achieved formal party rule changes that would bring even greater power to women within the party. The low proportion of women (7–14%) on the NEC through the 1970s and 1980s, as discussed at the outset of this section, increased to 30% at the beginning of the 1990s and to almost 50% by 1994. Yet McKay (2004) points out that women have had an easier time gaining accession to collective bodies, such as the NEC, than into the real top individual leadership positions.

Free Democrats (FDP)

Of the three German parties in this study, the FDP has the worst record regarding women among its highest ranks (Kolinsky, 1989). For the most part, the party is male. Officially, the FDP does not record membership by gender (Hall, 1981). Estimates reveal the number of female members has ebbed and flowed from 20% to 30% over time as a function of the FDP's coalition partners; when the FDP joined the CDU/CSU, women's membership fell, relative to when the FDP joined the Social Democrats. By 1995, Marilyn Rueschemeyer (1998) estimates 30% female members. In the early 1900s, the FDP had a rule to ensure a few women sat on the NEC, but this clause was removed in 1954 (Hall, 1981). Through the 1980s, women made up only about 10% of the party's national executive committee (Kolinsky, 1989; 1991). Interviews with party leaders revealed that the current state of affairs is no better—the party's regional and district offices are staffed overwhelmingly by men.
Despite women’s lack of representation in the party ranks, FDP women currently have no separate organization within the party. The original women’s organization was dissolved during the 1950s (Hall, 1981). Interviews with an FDP election coordinator revealed that the strategy of FDP women has traditionally focused on work within the mainstream organization, side-by-side with men. This strategy is consistent with the FDP’s ideological distaste for preferential treatment for special groups. Yet a few Free Democratic women formed the Association of Liberal Women in the early 1990s. The association is designed to pressure for women’s political equality, but it officially works outside the party hierarchy (Rueschemeyer, 1998).

Yet one segment of FDP women, disgruntled by their years of unrewarded service, organized outside the party to pressure party leaders to address the issue (Kolinsky, 1989; 1993). Under muted calls for reform, the party’s 1986 conference endorsed a programmatic statement called “Putting Equal Rights into Practice.” The FDP strictly rejected any formal rule changes to improve women’s status, stating that “liberals consider it a mistake to believe that special rights and protective clauses can create equal participation” (quoted in the Appendix of Kolinsky, 1993).

Women in the FDP still sought more than rhetoric. In 1987, women members pressed for a Frauenforderplan (Plan for the Advancement of Women) (see Kolinsky, 1989). As part of the plan, the party established an equality office, adjusted the dates and times of party congresses to minimize the conflict with family obligations, and adopted informal procedures to increase women’s representation among the party’s internal hierarchy (Kolinsky, 1993).

As part of this plan, the FDP drafts an annual report on the status of women within the party. In interviews, top party officials revealed that the party currently continues to file these reports, even though the reports have had little effect. Little more than lip service, these reports keep women’s representation on the party’s agenda, albeit on the back burner in many instances. Following the lead of the FDP, parties across the ideological spectrum began drafting similar annual reports on the status of women. In some other parties, these reports set the stage for quotas. Many women activists remarked that the reports are an annual reminder of the problem of women’s underrepresentation and a symbol of the importance of women in German party politics. In 1995, the FDP launched a new campaign called “More Opportunities for Women in the FDP” (McKay, 2004). Yet in the 1998 report, it was revealed that women’s presence in the top echelons and in parliament remained stagnant.

The FDP has yet to match the substantial gains of the SPD regarding women in the party leadership or in the Bundestag. Yet in the 1990s, the proportion of women on the NEC did climb to 20% from its original 10% in the 1970s and 1980s. According to interviews with a party election strategist, the
FDP has few future plans to increase women’s representation within the party. The party argues that because there are so few women members, there are few women in higher party posts.

Christian Democrats (CDU)

Through the 1960s, as part of the conservative ideology, the dominant attitude among CDU members and officials was that women’s proper place was in the family, taking care of children, or at church, participating in community service activities. At this time, women made up a large share of the CDU’s loyal and active membership. Increasingly in the 1970s, pressures from secularization and from the women’s movement into paid employment challenged these traditional attitudes (Wiliarty, 2001). As a result of changing attitudes, many women members left the CDU, weakening its loyal base of women’s support. The proportion of women members grew from 13% in 1969 to 20% in 1976. Yet since the late 1970s, women’s membership has largely stagnated. By comparison, women’s membership figures are lower in the more conservative CSU—reaching only 16% by 1995 (Rueschemeyer, 1998).

Relative to women in the SPD, women in the CDU have fewer representatives in the party hierarchy. Throughout the 1970s, up to only 10% of the NEC members were women. Although the CDU’s party program contained a provision early on that women should be “adequately” represented on party bodies, this clause was removed at the 1967 party conference (Hall, 1981).

The CDU’s women’s organization, the Frauenunion, has played a strong role within the party, but it has not demanded increases in women’s representation as strongly as the ASF. Established in 1947, the Frauenunion was successful in recruiting women members, so that the proportion of women members in the CDU grew through the 1970s. All CDU women are automatically members of the Frauenunion, which publishes a monthly magazine called *Frau und Politik* and has served as a training ground for some women who have risen to positions of leadership (McKay, 2004). Since 1972, the Frauenunion recommends women as potential parliamentary candidates, but the central party organization is not required to accept these recommendations (Hall, 1981).

For women in the CDU, the traditional track to gaining posts within the party led through the Frauenunion, to an even greater extent than in the other German parties. The party traditionally elected a representative of the Frauenunion as a deputy member of the party’s executive committee, giving women a voice among the top leadership, but not the power to execute decisions. While an honorary position on the NEC appears at first glance to be conducive to forwarding women’s issues, Kolinsky (1989) suggests that this outlet, in some respects, kept women from making stronger claims within the party, almost co-opting their support on party policies.
The tradition of giving women an honorary seat on the party’s NEC may stem from the CDU’s established norm of representation and control. Desiring to unite Catholics and Protestants under one umbrella for maximum electoral support, in the 1950s the CDU formed a system of proportional representation (“proporz”) by ensuring adequate Protestant influence on the party’s highest decision-making bodies (Wiliarty, 2001). The CDU continued as a “loose alliance of regional and interest organizations” until Helmut Kohl intensified the process of centralization under his leadership in the 1970s (Clemens, 2000: 68). The CDU’s historically segmented organization has shaped its response to new contenders today, and has laid the foundation for the separate track for women within the party.

Although the SPD began debating women’s representation in the early 1970s, the CDU did not take up this issue until the 1980s. Simply put, women inside the CDU had made less-direct claims for parity. Yet in the late 1980s, CDU women, increasingly professional, and increasingly frustrated by the CDU’s glass ceiling, made stronger arguments for representation. The influx of working women transformed the Frauenunion from an organization that had served primarily as a forum for socializing and campaigning to a more politicized organization with an admittedly weak feminist agenda. The more political and strategic the Frauenunion became, the more power it gained among the party structure (Wiliarty, 2001). Although the Frauenunion pressured the CDU leadership for a role in the decision-making process, party leaders offered few concessions through the late 1970s and early 1980s. Yet by the mid-1980s, when the Frauenunion forged an alliance with the controlling factions, party leaders took notice. Rather than aligning with the internal opposition, the Frauenunion connected itself with those who had the power to change party policies. Thus, the CDU’s position on women’s participation was shaped by internal interest group bargaining (Wiliarty, 2001).

Together, increased demands, the Greens’ success, and the Frauenunion’s new position in the dominant party coalition sparked a series of increasingly effective concessions from party leaders. In the first concession in 1985, the CDU forwarded a new plan called the “New Partnership” and placed the minister of youth, family, and health in charge of the operation. The “New Partnership” document states that the “political equality of women, however, must not remain a matter for women alone, but it has to become an issue for the party” (Kolinsky, 1993: Appendix). The new initiative catapulted more women to higher party positions, and at the 1986 party congress, the CDU committed to some target percentages for women’s representation. The targets stopped short of quotas, which were viewed as too stringent, even by the majority of women within the party (Kolinsky, 1989).

Women within the party certainly have grounds upon which to base their claims for a more feminine face in parliament. Punctuating a steady decline,
the 1998 election marked a sharp drop in women’s support for the CDU/CSU. Their support dropped in both the East and the West. Research has pointed out the value of women’s votes to the Right. In an analysis of the 1998 voting data, Mary N. Hampton (2000) states, “It is clear that eroding support among women for the CDU/CSU made a real difference in the election’s outcome. With a loss in support of approximately 10% among women in less than 10 years, the outcome is dramatic and in need of further explanation” (159). If key women within the party can tie these electoral losses among target groups to a lack of women in the parliamentary party, they may gain greater concessions from the party leadership. Rita Sussmuth publicly argued for this connection, stating “those who do not move will be moved aside” (quoted in Hampton, 2000: 170).

Although Helmut Kohl had gone back and forth with a leading female figure in the party and former parliamentary president, Rita Sussmuth, party insiders revealed that Kohl emerged as a surprising force for attention to women’s underrepresentation in the CDU. Rita Sussmuth’s efforts to convince Kohl of women’s electoral importance eventually paid off. In the next set of party concessions, in the mid-1990s Helmut Kohl opened the “Frauendebatte,” stating that women’s support was integral to the party’s future (Hampton, 1994). He led the party to adopt more direct measures to promote women in the party hierarchy.

Because CDU women’s claims came later and more moderately than those in the SPD, CDU women’s gains in the party and in the Bundestag have come later as well. Yet relative to its sister British Conservative Party, women in the CDU have fared well. As a result of the CDU’s women’s inclusion as part of the dominant party faction, women’s share of the seats on the CDU’s NEC reached almost 35% by the mid-1990s. The importance of women’s organized alignment within the party illustrates the strategic necessity of gaining voice within the party leadership, denoting a process led from the top, rather than the party’s grass roots.

Alliance 90/The Greens

The West German Green Party was founded on the principles of equality, including parity for women within the party and in office. Within the Greens, the Federal Women’s Council oversees women’s equality in politics and organizes a conference each year (McKay, 2004). Women make up 50% of the Green Party at all levels—as federal chairs, delegates, conference speakers, party employees, and candidates. The Greens win nearly all of their seats from their lists, and they ensure women’s representation by zipping, or alternating male and female candidates within the list. However, if there are insufficient
candidates of either sex, the zipping procedure can be abandoned (McKay, 2004). In fact, at the time the West and East German Green parties merged in 1993, Alliance 90 claimed quotas were too stringent at that time, and they won an exemption for two years (McKay, 2004).

Party Rule Changes: A Diffusion of Gender Quotas

Candidate gender quotas characterize the German party system’s response to women’s claims for greater representation. And, as the following sections illustrate, the adoption of gender quotas was not limited to the more egalitarian Left. Instead, rule changes have diffused across the German party system. Certainly a climate of competition for women’s votes provided the backdrop for the adoption of quotas.

Alliance 90/The Greens

Quotas were first introduced into the German system by the Green Party, which entered the Bundestag in 1983 with a firm commitment to women’s equal representation. From the start, women gained prominent positions in the party organization, such as the joint leader of the parliamentary party and chair of the parliamentary committee, and women always held half of the positions at the executive level (Kolinsky, 1989). Yet at the parliamentary level, the Greens’ commitment to equality at first fell short. As a consequence, at their federal party congress in 1986, the Greens introduced a formal candidate gender quota of 50% for candidates. At each election, the party list was to alternate the names of men and women. As a result, in 1987 the Greens attracted voters’ attention by entering the election with an unprecedented number of female candidates. Women in rival parties, who for years had been pressing their parties to increase women’s representation, envied the Greens’ quota policies, which allowed women to achieve parity in a very short time.

Social Democrats (SPD)

The SDP most acutely felt pressure to adopt quotas because of their attempts to compete for young women voters. Young women in the SPD prized equal participation in the party, especially at the top ranks. Women rose to the higher ranks of the SPD organization in greater numbers under Willy Brandt’s leadership beginning in 1969, yet these increases were not matched at the parliamentary level (Kolinsky, 1989). After the SPD’s 1972 election success, the ASF focused on rule changes to mandate more women candidates. Interviews
with party activists revealed that the quota debate originated within the ASF as female members became disillusioned with their lack of representation in positions of power. Women who had been elected to party positions such as deputies and party managers climbed to the top of the party ranks. By 1987, women on the party’s NEC directly lobbied for quotas. One of those women who rose to power, Anke Martiny, issued a report that cited the structural barriers to increasing women’s representation, which she called “Comrade Obstruction”; she called for structural measures to rectify the situation, yet little action came from these recommendations (Kolinsky, 1989; Hoeker, 1998).

After the Greens introduced quotas, the SPD leadership began to follow suit. Yet rule changes came in increasingly stringent steps. The first response to the Greens came during the SPD federal party congress in Nuremburg in 1986, when the SPD accepted the principle of quotas, but did not yet adopt the logistical plans for a real policy (Kolinsky, 1993). Finally, in 1988 the party congress voted to implement a 40% quota for both internal and parliamentary offices. The quotas were to be achieved in two stages, 33% women in the Bundestag by 1994, and 40% by 1998. Although the ASF oversees the quota policy, the party has no sanctions if it is not enforced (McKay, 2004).

These changes in party rules altered party practices and norms of operation. Kolinsky (1993) notes that, in the case of the SPD, efforts to promote women quickly through the party ranks necessitated changes in the party’s recruitment patterns. Quotas cleared out the long-standing backlog of women potential candidates for upper and midlevel elite positions among the party’s local ranks. Therefore, in subsequent years it became necessary to promote women who had not served the traditional “Ochsentour” through the party ranks, thus creating a new route to the top, cleverly titled “from the side” by party insiders.

Free Democrats (FDP)

The FDP was the first party to react to the Greens’ quota policy, but merely at a rhetorical level. At first, the FDP leadership used the issue of women’s representation to vie for women’s votes. The party congress in Hanover in May 1986 endorsed a formal recommendation to advance women’s opportunities. However, the FDP denounces quotas, claiming that these rules downgrade the importance of the quality of candidates (Kolinsky, 1989). Yet at the next party conference in 1987, the FDP did adopt a rule for “target” numbers of women, a policy that allowed the party to stop short of formal quotas but to demonstrate symbolic support for women candidates.

The FDP’s ideological orientation toward individual rights and individual achievement means the party will continue to shun formal quotas. Instead, women are expected to make gains based upon their own merit, rather than through protective measures. Yet party leaders do express a desire to gain
women members. The FDP is entangled in a catch-22—no direct measures to promote party women, few women members, and even fewer women in the Bundestag. As a result, the FDP’s record on women’s advancement is likely to continue to proceed at a snail’s pace.

Christian Democrats (CDU)

Compared with the SPD, the CDU felt less pressure for quotas from its women’s organization. Like women in the FDP, on the basis of ideological consistency, CDU women do not support quotas as a mechanism of special treatment. In a survey of women candidates, Kolinsky (1991) finds that both CDU and FDP women dislike the idea of quotas and would rather wait for selection based upon merit. While 95% of Green and 70% of SPD women candidates support quotas, only 10% of CDU and FDP women express the same support.

Without women’s pressure, the CDU members denounced quotas at their 1986 party congress. Yet, as detailed in the previous section, by the 1990s the CDU began to covet the votes of young professional women and perceived a need to update the party image. In 1994, when Chancellor Helmut Kohl opened up the “Frauendebatte,” he threw his support behind direct mechanisms to promote more women. At a party conference, Kohl reasoned, “If we want to get a start into the future we have to do it now . . . The image of the CDU is colored by how it deals with change in society” (as quoted in Davis, 1997). And with that, the Conservatives had moved to promote women. At first, the party rank and file rejected a loose quota rule at the 1995 party conference (Hampton, 2000). Under Kohl’s leadership, in 1996 the CDU finally agreed to adopt a lighter form of quotas. Stopping short of actual quotas, the CDU called their new affirmative action policy a “quorum” in order to bypass the leftist term they had eschewed for years (Davis, 1997; Hoeker, 1998). The new selection rules called for 30% women at all levels of the party and among the party’s parliamentary candidates (Hampton, 1995).

Conclusions

Battling for women’s votes, and challenged by women within the party, the German Greens, the SPD, and eventually the CDU changed their selection rules to bolster women’s parliamentary presence. Similar to the story of British Labour, to ignite the process of quota diffusion, electoral pressure was complemented by party leaders’ realization that women’s votes are essential to building a winning coalition, and that running more women candidates would be an effective method of attracting those women’s votes.
In this way, electoral pressure and women’s activism worked in a dynamic process in Germany. Importantly, the German case is an exemplar for the importance of strategy by the party women’s organization. Selecting the right intraparty coalition partners proved key to getting women’s parliamentary presence on the political agenda, and to gaining enough organizational power to change the party selection rules.