INTRODUCTION

The breakdown of Communism in Eastern Europe has been characterized as the ‘black Friday of the social sciences’ by Klaus von Beyme (1990a, p.472). Few had theorized about and even fewer had predicted the end of the former Stalinist regimes and with them the collapse of the post-1945 bipolar structure and Soviet hegemony in the region. All the East European states are now enmeshed in a transition that many hope will lead to stable democratic order. Whether this will occur or not is, as with the breakdown, something social science cannot predict today. But, in the case of the GDR, this may be less problematic in both theoretical and practical terms. The German problem, at least in the eyes of some Germans, was solved with the unification. Of all the nations that are now in the process of transition to democracy, what was once the GDR is in a privileged position: ‘The former GDR is about to slip into a new paternalistic relationship, in order to allow all its problems to be solved by a big brother’ (von Beyme 1990b, p.180).

This last statement may be somewhat misleading in that it could be taken to mean that the citizens of the former GDR have completely renounced any further action within the political sphere. There is no sign of that and there will be many opportunities in the future where their actions in this sphere will not only influence their own lives but also those of others. The East German voters played a critical role in deciding which party or parties should be given the responsibility to solve the massive problems that are now on the agenda of the Federal Republic. This opportunity arose in the first elections of the united Germany in December 1990. This election was the last in what at times seemed an endless series beginning with the first free elections to the
People's Chamber (Volkskammer) in March 1990, followed by the local elections in May and continued by the first elections of the newly re-established Länder in October 1990.

These elections in the former GDR offer an opportunity for systematic empirical analysis of the special case of the German transition process. This might serve as a starting point for understanding the evolution of new patterns of political behaviour within a population that had not had the opportunity to express its own preferences freely. Such understanding might also help to shed light on some of the problems Germany confronts as the attempt is made to integrate it into a single political community.

In these four elections the CDU, the strongest ally of the SED in the former bloc party system, rose like a phoenix from the ashes and consistently attracted the largest number of the votes. What struck Western observers was the fact that this party found its strongest base of support among the blue-collar workers, a group many (based upon Western experience) had anticipated would lean heavily towards the SPD. Indeed, given the socio-economic make-up of this former workers' state, the SPD was expected to emerge as the dominant political force. As things turned out, it only managed to achieve the status of the largest minority parliamentary grouping. Furthermore the revolutionaries, who had played a decisive role in forcing the Stalinist system to declare default, were marginalized politically by the electorate.

The fundamental political choice expressed in these elections needs to be explained. The predominant explanation of electoral behaviour in the West (see Falter and Schumann 1989) are of limited use. Free elections had never taken place in the former GDR and the new party system was only in its formative stage. Despite this, voting behaviour showed a consistent pattern of a 'conservative majority', as Feist (1990) has called it, across all four elections. Whether this will contribute to overcoming the cleavages of the old exclusionary system or lead to establishing yet another one between this new conservative majority and a fragmented left wing remains to be seen.

In the next section we review some of the explanations that have been offered to account for the voting behaviour of the electorate in the area of the GDR. In the third section we turn to a description of how the patterns of voting behaviour have developed in this quick succession of elections. This is followed by a preliminary assessment of one explanation for a major outcome of all of these elections: namely, the popular acceptance of a party with a programme of radical change in the political-economic sphere. The description and analysis