Grounding European Policy: Policy, Power and Parties

The first chapter performs the important task of grounding SPD European policy in theory, locating the study within existing bodies of literature. This is achieved through an examination of three dimensions that together help us to understand the strategic alternatives for the party within the context of established patterns of European policy, the pursuit of German policy in Europe (channels of power), and the changing nature of political parties. The chapter starts by examining the policy framework for (West) Germany and the SPD since the establishment of the Federal Republic, illustrating the established patterns of European policy in place prior to reunification. It argues that German policy at the point of unification was identified by exaggerated multilateralism and an associated tendency to solve problems by donating extra funds to the EC coffers in deference to partner states (especially France). SPD policy at this time was firmly embedded in a cross-party consensus on European policy. This state of affairs was called into question by the climatic changes described in Chapter 2. Second, the chapter investigates the nature of German policy-making and the exercise of German power in Europe. It contends that the exaggerated multilateralism practised under the Kohl Chancellorship (and characteristic of post-war patterns of German diplomacy) oriented towards agenda-setting and milieu-shaping, but that this style of European policy was challenged by climatic change after unification. Political parties theory is used to explain the internal dynamics of the SPD examined in Chapters 5–7, and the strategic choices made by the party, by explaining the changing mechanics of party politics. While establishing more party discipline in the late 1990s, the SPD has sought to become a more efficient electoral machine, to resonate policy competence and win elections at the federal level. These three dimensions are central to understanding the development of SPD
policy after 1990. The chapter finally sets out how a changing political environment has ultimately resulted in an SPD European policy characterised by pragmatic multilateralism – a commitment to represent (Europeanised) German interests more forcefully, but within the multilateral setting of the European Union.

European policy in Germany and the SPD

From 1949 onwards, West Germany began to build up a network of co-operative relationships with its western neighbours, helping to create an environment of multilateral structures for political and economic rehabilitation. Peace and stability were of prime importance with respect to the division of Europe between the West and the East, which placed the Federal Republic at the front line of the Cold War. The regeneration of the West German economy was also a top priority for the first post-war administration. In terms of foreign affairs, policy centred on re-establishing German diplomatic credibility (after the experiences of the Second World War) through partnership with its West European neighbours (in particular, France) and strong ties with the United States. This was put into concrete form through the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, and afterwards the Treaty of Rome (1957) which established the European Community. In security matters, affairs were soon conducted through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), joined by Germany in 1955. As these policies were customised, a West-oriented multilateral political strategy was reinforced by a booming economy with a heavy export bias,\(^1\) heavily concentrated in Western Europe. Greater political co-operation was a logical by-product of greater economic interdependence. All these factors drew German leaders towards a European policy that was, by the late 1950s, unquestionably committed to co-operation, integration and multilateralism, in stark contrast to the ‘Realpolitik’ of the Wilhemine and National Socialist eras.

West Germany was, furthermore, mindful of the restraints placed upon her in the post-war period. In the domestic context, these restraints included: the constitution with its ‘Basic Law’; co-operative federalism within the republic; the existence of powerful parapublic\(^2\) institutions (e.g. the Bundesbank); the lack of a nuclear arsenal; the presence of Allied troops on German soil; and, the guilt and moral reparations that resulted from the War. They acted to mould West German power and policy towards reconciliation and multilateral co-operation with its Western neighbours. External pressures came from US policy