

The CDU: Still a Party for the Future?

By Wolfgang Stock

Why does the outlook for the CDU look so bleak?

How has Merkel's leadership affected the party?

During most of the last sixty years, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) used to be “the” German party: five out of eight German chancellors have been CDU leaders, forty out of sixty years of the Federal Republic of Germany have seen federal governments with Christian Democratic (and Christian Social, not to forget the Bavarian sister party) ministers.

As a *Volkspartei* with election results of often 45 percent or more in a multi-party system, the CDU has been a cornerstone of German politics.

Of the great decisions setting the course of German politics, most of them can be found in chapters of history dealing with CDU leaders: Konrad Adenauer anchoring postwar Germany in the West and freeing the German prisoners of war from the Soviet Union (1955); the introduction of “social market economy” as the way to prosperity for all social groups (Ludwig Erhard); first contacts to the communist East (Kurt Georg Kiesinger); introduction of the European single currency and German unification (Helmut Kohl); and the first woman and East German in the highest office (Angela Merkel).

But the last four years in a Grand Coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) have weakened the party. Or is it because of Angela Merkel, the CDU's leader since 2000?

Angela Merkel is not only the first woman in office and first from former eastern Germany, but also the first chairperson with both a distinct Protestant and scientific background.

Today, the “grand old” party is in a crisis. Judged from the perspective a week before Election Day, the party meanders around 35 percent in the polls—and is likely to drop down to the painful 35.2 percent Angela Merkel scored in 2005. She came into office with a very narrow margin—indeed, the same poor showing that sent Helmut Kohl out of office (35.1 percent in 1998). Not since 1953 has the CDU had such a modest result. And while Merkel as chancellor has seen excellent popularity ratings, her party has not been able to utilize this popularity. Critics say that Merkel was popular as a chancellor because she appeals to the left political spectrum, too—but, on the other hand, this has been a burden to her party, unable to formulate a clear party message.

Critics have been proven right by Merkel's campaign strategy. Together with Ronald Pofalla, her soft-footed party secretary general, she believes that “loyal voters have to choose us anyway.” Therefore, the CDU's 2009 campaign is the most “low profile” campaign ever, lacking controversial aims—in fact anything that could annoy *Wechselwähler* (swing voters) from the Social Democrats.

As a result, the regional elections on 30 August 2009 were a disaster for Merkel's CDU: It lost its absolute majorities in Thuringia and Saarland, and lost many local councils and mayors in North Rhine-Westphalia, the biggest German federal state with one-fifth of the electorate. In Thuringia, the CDU lost one-third of its seats—a coalition of Social Democrats and the Left Party (a party comprised of former East German communists and West German unionists) now has a majority there. In Saarland, Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Left Party are able to form the state government now.

True, the Social Democrats have not been happy with their recent results either. But their weaknesses and losses can be explained by the growth of the Left Party, a coalition partner of the SPD in several eastern *Länder* at the state and local level in past and present.

However, the SPD does have a major advantage over Merkel's CDU: they possess a strategic majority. Without the SPD a majority is impossible, be it in Thuringia and Saarland or be it after the forthcoming general elections. The SPD is able to form a coalition with both the Greens and the Left Party—and even the Free Democrats (FDP) would, if need be, forget their pre-election vows and team up with the SPD.

The CDU, conversely, has a very limited choice: only a future coalition with the FDP is in the cards. If worst comes to worst and a black-yellow coalition does not gain a majority in the Bundestag (as it appears from the polls right before Election Day), a new attempt to prolong the Grand Coalition is the only alternative on offer to Merkel. Neither other party, be it the Greens or the Left Party, would be a possible coalition partner for her on the federal level (only once, and quite recently, a shaky CDU-Green coalition started in the city state of Hamburg).

Therefore, Frank-Walter Steinmeier could easily show confidence in the last weeks of the election campaign: He may not become chancellor, but his present job as vice chancellor looks safe, in whatever constellation.

This is a bleak outlook for the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the CSU. The prospect of a coalition with the Free Democrats dwindling, the best they can hope for is a new version of the Grand Coalition with the SPD—a coalition that might have a mathematical majority but no political overlapping, no common projects. And which would, most strategists agree, definitely not last long—maybe only until after the state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia next year.

Bleak perspectives indeed—but why? Party grassroots criticize Merkel for her soft approach and the complete lack of any arguments with the political opponents. Indeed, nearly all observers agreed after the much advertised television debate between Merkel and Steinmeier, two weeks before Election Day, that the two candidates had few differences, more “singing in duet” rather than arguing with each other.

Merkel has developed a presidential style of leadership, cultivated an image as a caring figure, a “mother of the nation.” She is often portrayed as having steered Germany through the recession (which hit the export champion much harder than the U.S.). But many voters, including a huge number in her own camp, know that many problems have only been delayed until after Election Day. This includes the officially-praised Opel deal with General Motors, in which Germany in effect offers a €4.5 billion stimulus for a Canadian-Russian consortium to take over the German subsidiary of General Motors (GM) in the vain hope that not too many jobs will be shed. However, the hopes are so slim that Merkel's economics minister once offered his resignation and the governments' trustees have not approved the deal.

Many of the CDU's electorate see this deal, authored jointly by Merkel and Steinmeier, as a betrayal of the CDU's old market economy roots. Merkel campaigned on exactly this pro-market ticket only four years ago. Back then, she promoted tough reforms to streamline the German social market economy. For her, the lesson learned is: to stay in power, she and the CDU must pursue a soft and “social democratic” or populist style.

Today, the CDU is Merkel, and Merkel is the CDU. But the CDU used to be much more than just one chairperson.

Merkel has been very successful in outmaneuvering her rivals. None have been politically “murdered” by her; most of them made grave political errors that resulted in their decline. But she has not let anyone rise up through the ranks.

The difference between Merkel’s reign and those of the former chairmen is stark: Even under Helmut Kohl, who was a strong CDU leader for twenty years (the latter sixteen years of which as chancellor) there were always intellectual and charismatic highfliers in his team, among them Heiner Geissler and Kurt Biedenkopf. After nine years of Merkel as a CDU leader, there is no one of that kind. The last intellectual to leave the arena is Friedrich Merz, a very talented financial expert with brilliant rhetoric.

Even worse for the party base is the lack of “values” within the party and its program. Prior to Angela Merkel, all CDU leaders have been strong Christian believers and Catholic (if we may exclude the very brief appearance of Merkel’s predecessor, Wolfgang Schäuble). Merkel is Protestant and her election as party chairwoman in 2000 was thus a shock to a large part of the party establishment.

Although she is the daughter of a Protestant minister, Merkel has, to-date, never shown an interest in publicly demonstrating the importance of her religious beliefs. Combined with a “pro choice” stance on abortion and a very progressive course in the field of embryonic research, she has alienated many of the traditional CDU voters since.

Furthermore, earlier this year, she attacked the Pope in an overtly populist (and wrong footed) move, thus alienating not only Catholic but also Protestant believers who saw this as an unacceptable political attack on a religious leader to please liberal critics. Merkel’s attack led some 6,000 party members to leave the party—arguably many of the most active members. It has been noted that Merkel has made no visible attempt to win them back.

Many of the outspoken market economy proponents find an alternative in voting for the Free Democrats, who are set to jump from 9.8 percent in 2004 to 14 percent or more. Under Guido Westerwelle, the FDP has appealed to traditional conservative voters disillusioned with Merkel’s shift over the past four years. Her compromises with the SPD, agreeing to a minimum wage in many sectors and announcing the fiscal stimulus plans, have helped the FDP to propose a neo-liberal agenda, pledging tax cuts and health and labor market reforms. This opposition course is in stark contrast to the decisions of Merkel’s Grand Coalition to introduce multi-billion euro bank nationalizations and two fiscal stimulus packages, including another overtly populist measure—the €5 billion car scrapping bonus (“cash for clunkers”), which was offered to people to trade in their old cars for new ones.

While there is an alternative for market-oriented conservatives, those voters with a Christian value-based background are left without alternative. The FDP does not at all appeal to them, and other prominent “value” promoters do not exist in German politics.

The result is a steady drop in voter turnout in recent years. This time, CDU supporters are those that feel least inclined to go to the polling stations on 27 September, as has already been demonstrated in Thuringia, Saxony, and Saarland. According to some polls, up to one-third of the electorate will make up their minds only very shortly before Election Day. It may well be that they, and especially traditional CDU voters, decide to abstain.

This lack of any enthusiasm among conservative grassroots is felt massively throughout the party in these election weeks, too. Very few party organizations are engaged in campaigning on the local level; hardly any prominent endorsements can be associated

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with Merkel's campaign.

The CDU appears to be headed for what happened to its European sister parties some twenty years ago: they fragmented into smaller, more focused parties. In Germany, the general election of 2009 will prove the end of the concept of the *Volkspartei*, a party able to integrate all strands of society. This applies to both formerly big *Volksparteien*: the SPD would be happy to reach 25 percent in this year's vote (its best result was 45.8 in 1972 with Willy Brandt as chancellor). Likewise, the CDU/CSU dream of the 48.6 percent they won in 1983 with Helmut Kohl at the helm, while still polling only some 36 percent now (and polling that high thanks only to the still much stronger CSU boosting the CDU in Bavaria—which alone has less than 30 percent outside of Bavaria).

Indeed, the future of the CDU is bleak: If Merkel wins the election she will buy some time but is unlikely to stop the trend of losing her best and brightest party members and voters. And once the CDU loses power—be it now or next year—Merkel will be ousted. Her most likely successor is Christian Wulff, Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, and a lightweight. He will not be able to re-integrate the brains and voters lost.

The CDU could eventually break up and make way for a number of smaller parties focused on those strands of thought that the former *Volkspartei* is no longer able to attract: Atlanticist, Christian values, and market economy fundamentals.

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