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Introduction by Michael C. Behrent, Appalachian State University

Because Germany is Europe's most populous country (excluding Russia), its most productive economy, and the European Union's indispensable member, its elections are necessarily significant. Yet even by this standard, the federal election held on 26 September was particularly consequential and unusual. It marked the end of Angela Merkel's sixteen-year tenure as Chancellor, during which she established herself as the preeminent figure in German domestic politics, an influential presence on the international stage, and a stabilizing temperament during a tumultuous era of global politics. As the forum's contributors note, this election was the first in the Federal Republic's history (except for the first) in which the sitting chancellor did not seek reelection. At the same time, the election exemplifies the gradual abandonment of some of the mainstays of postwar German politics. For instance, the standard center-left/center-right faceoff (between the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* and the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands--Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* alliance) has given way to a fragmented political landscape in which no less than five parties claimed over ten percent of the vote. Meanwhile, the growing personalization of German politics explains the success of the Social-Democratic candidate Olaf Scholz, who played on his stature as Finance Minister in Merkel's coalition government, as well as the lackluster performance of the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* candidate Armin Laschet. At the same time, the vote's dispersal across multiple parties makes it probable that Germany will have its first three-party governing coalition since the 1950s. Another novelty resulting from the election is that the two leading kingmaker parties—the Greens and the liberal *Freie Demokratische Partei* —have committed to aligning their own platforms before deciding which party they will being to power.

A major stake of this election, as some of our contributors observe, is Germany's post-Merkel future. The outgoing chancellor's moderate, consensus-based politics were popular at home and appreciated abroad. Yet because of Merkel's penchant for compromise, many controversial issues will be inherited by her successor, who, at the time of writing, seems likely to be Scholz—once, that is, a complicated and potentially lengthy round of coalition negotiations has run its course. Though Merkel has, at times, championed the cause of climate change, Germany is still the largest producer of CO2 emissions in the European Union. On this issue, Merkel has conceded failure. She has, moreover, been reluctant to mobilize Germany's strength to lead the EU. As Stephen Szabo concludes in his essay, "she was a cautious crisis manager in Europe but not more." She awarded Russian President Vladimir Putin a significant foreign policy victory—and put her American allies in an uncomfortable position—by promoting the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which increases Germany's energy dependence on Russia and weakens Ukraine. Despite the premium on professing continuity with Merkel—which both Scholz and Laschet indulged in in different ways—the new government will feel compelled to live up to the desire—as Szabo puts it—for "a change of leadership and for a renewal of Germany's role both at home and abroad."

All things considered, Germany's 2021 federal elections were characterized by a moderate tone and lack of turmoil, at least compared to recent votes in other western countries. The major center-left and center-right parties remain reasonably strong, even if their share of the electorate is dwindling. While the populist surge that began five years ago has hardly disappeared, it seems, at least in Germany, to have crested: the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* mustered only a little over 10% of the vote. Compared to the colorful and atypical characters that have risen to the political forefront in the last several years in western, Olaf Scholz exemplifies competent blandness.

This apparent stability notwithstanding, many signs can be found in Germany's recent election that its political system is being transformed by multiple forces, as the forum's contributors demonstrate in their essays. Sarah Wiliarty argues that selecting a chancellor rather than supporting a political party has become the primary electoral dynamic. The "personalization" of German politics is evident in Scholz's popularity, which considerably exceeds that of his party, the unforgiving public reaction to Laschet's gaffes, and the role played by Annalena Baerbock, the Green's first-ever Chancellor candidate. Szabo, for his part, argues that the most striking change is that Germany, which had once been democracy's problem child, can now claim to have the most robust democratic institutions in the western world: its parliamentary federalism discourages personalization (contra Wiliarty), and its many political parties mitigate polarization. Finally, Eric Langenbacher observes that young people flocked to the *Freie Demokratische Partei* and the

Greens, making it possible that the generational forces they harnessed could influence the new government, in which they are likely to participate. Even if the years ahead are unlikely to be as tumultuous as they were in the United Kingdom, the United States, and France, our contributors concur that Germany is entering a period in which its politics are being reconfigured, with all the uncertainty this entails.

Participants:

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Stephen F. Szabo is an adjunct professor in The BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University. He is the author of numerous works on German foreign policy, most recently *Germany, Russia and the Rise of Geo-economics* (Bloomsbury, 2015)

Sarah Wiliarty is an associate professor of Government at Wesleyan University. She is the author of *The CDU and the Politics of Gender in Germany: Bringing Women to the Party* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). She also does research on women in political parties, media coverage of female candidates, and Western European nuclear energy policy.

Essay by Eric Langenbacher, Georgetown University

A Paradoxical Election

The elections for the twentieth term of Germany's lower house (Bundestag) on 26 September were important for a variety of reasons. First, this was the only election since 1949 in which an incumbent chancellor was not running. This created an incredibly open and close race. Second, the resulting fragmented parliament will necessitate the first three-party coalition at the federal level in decades (if ever).[1] Even though the Federal Republic has always had coalitions, the marked complexity of this potential government generates fears for its longevity and for potential destabilization in German and European politics. Third, the election marks the end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's tenure—one that has been lauded across the world. Her successor will not have her experience, skills set, or stature domestically or abroad. Few politicians of her generation have been able to negotiate and forge deals or to manage crises as she has.[2]

When the votes were counted, the Social Democrats (SPD) had come in first with just under 26% of the vote.[3] Not only was this more than 5% more than their 2017 result, but it represented a 10% increase from their long-term polling average of 15-16%. This was almost all due to their popular candidate and then finance minister, Olaf Scholz, who is perceived by many Germans as a competent, reassuring, and experienced figure, but with little charisma. He successfully positioned himself as a semi-incumbent and worthy successor to Merkel. The SPD also made no mistakes in their campaign and benefitted from the early choice of Scholz in summer of 2020. Mention should also be made of SPD victories in the states of Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, which had elections on the same day. The winners there—Franziska Giffey and Manuela Schwesig—are major forces in the next generation of leading SPD politicians.[4]

The center-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) had a very bad evening, witnessing their worst result ever, coming in at barely 24%—although this figure was a couple of percentage points better than that of the last polls. The party suffered from some voter fatigue, having led the government for the last 16 years, and remains internally divided after the CDU leadership contest in January and protracted tensions over choosing a chancellor candidate in the spring. The eventual nominee, Armin Laschet, the incumbent minister president of the most populous state of North Rhine Westphalia was a disastrous candidate with lackluster campaign messaging and who committed many gaffes. Voters across the country focused on him laughing in the background while the ceremonial president was giving a speech to the victims of the July flooding catastrophe. After that, support declined precipitously and barely recovered.[5]

Although the Greens had their best-ever result at 15%, this was disappointing because they had consistently been polling over 20% for several years. There was a good chance earlier this year that they would even come in first. A poor

[1] Adenauer's governments from 1949-1957 were technically three-party coalitions given the inclusion of the small German Party (DP), which ceased to exist in 1960. Moreover, the Christian Democratic Union is legally separate from Bavaria's Christian Social Union, although they always caucus together in the Bundestag and are treated as one actor, known as the Union.

[2] See Joyce Marie Mushaben, *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the Berlin* Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[3] All data from Tagesschau, "Desutschland Bundestagswahl 2021," https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2021-09-26-BT-DE/index.shtml.

[4] https://www.berlin.de/en/news/6956320-5559700-preliminary-final-result-SPD-wins-berlin.en.html; https://www.kas.de/en/monitor/detail/-/content/wahlanalyse-der-landtagswahl-in-mecklenburg-vorpommern-am-26-september-2021

[5] See "Sonntagsfrage Bundestagswahl," https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/.

campaign and gaffes by candidate Annalena Baerbock that featured resumé stretching and plagiarism allegations reduced the party's support, as did the potential costs of the Greens' ambitious climate agenda. The Free Democratic Party (FDP), a classically liberal party also increased its support by just under 1 %, but the party and its leader, Christian Lindner, have a lot of momentum going into coalition negotiations. It is a near certainty that both the Greens and FDP will be in the next government. The day after the election they even started preliminary talks to work out their differences. Interestingly, these two parties were the most popular for younger voters under the age of 25.[6]

The Left Party experienced a drubbing, earning a paltry 4.9% of the vote. Despite the 5% electoral threshold, they will nevertheless be in parliament with this share of the vote because they won 3 direct mandates, a little used stipulation of the electoral law. About half of the Bundestag is elected by plurality in single member constituencies—the other portion is selected by proportional representation based on national vote totals, but within the 16 federal states.[7] Their strident social justice themes did not resonate and their aging eastern base was not motivated to vote. The populist radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) dropped from nearly 13% in 2017 to 10 % of the vote, but are increasingly entrenched in the southern part of eastern Germany (the states of Saxony and Thuringia) where they won 16 direct mandates (all of which had been held by the CDU). With migration not dominating the headlines, the party had difficulties finding issues that gained traction. Vicious in-fighting continues and the party's future prospects beyond a hard 10% core electorate is an open question—especially if the post-Merkel CDU moves to the right.

Because of other vagaries of the election law, the Bundestag will have the most ever members with 735.[8] This makes it the second largest legislature in the world behind that of China. Reform to this system will be high on the agenda of the next government. Women will comprise 34.7% of the legislature, up from 30.7% after 2017 and members with a 'migration background' (a term of German bureaucratese) will make up 11.3%, albeit nowhere near the more than 25% that comprises their share of the overall population. Turnout was up slightly to 76.6% despite the record request for mail-in ballots.

Regarding the next government, there are three mathematical possibilities. One of them—a continuation of the current grand coalition (CDU/CSU-SPD)—is highly unlikely. There is pervasive exhaustion with such a coalition among both the electorate and political class because such a government has ruled for the last 8 years and 12 out of the last 16 years. A "Jamaica" coalition (each party has a color, and the coalition names correspond to the colors of that country's flag) of black (CDU/CSU), Green, and yellow (FDP) is also unlikely. The chancellor would be CDU leader Laschet (if he survives politically) the unequivocal loser in the election. Public and political opinion would push against this option, even if the Greens and Liberals (rightfully) think they will get more from a weak Laschet than the alternative. More probable is the "traffic light" coalition—red (SPD), Green, and yellow. Although this is not enshrined in law, as the chancellor candidate of the largest parliamentary party Scholz should have the right to first try to form a coalition.[9] Preliminary talks are already under way and formal negotiations should start soon.

[6] "FDP und Grüne bei unter 25-Jährigen hoch im Kurs. So haben die jungen Wähler in Deutschland abgestimmt," *Der Tagesspiel,* 26 September 2021, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/fdp-und-gruene-bei-unter-25-jaehrigen-hoch-im-kurs-so-haben-die-jungen-waehler-in-deutschland-abgestimmt/27650670.html.

[7] Eric Langenbacher, "The Political and Electoral System of Germany," American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 12 July 2021, https://www.aicgs.org/2021/07/the-political-and-electoral-system-of-germany/.

[8] For more details, see Eric Langenbacher, *The Germany Polity*, 12th ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).

[9] Marc Debus, Thorsten Faas and Julius Lagodny, "Angela Merkel's bloc lost ground in Sunday's election. So who won?," *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage (blog), 30 September 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/29/angela-merkels-bloc-lost-ground-sundays-election-so-who-won/.

Still, there are a lot of policy disagreements, such as the speed with which the country will transition to a carbon neutral economy, and potential internal obstacles, like the more leftist SPD party membership approving a coalition agreement. It will likely take a few months to negotiate the incredibly detailed agreement, which will lay out a legislative and regulatory agenda for the next 4 years, as well as determining who will hold what ministries. Because the finance minister has a veto on certain spending priorities, control over that ministry is especially important. Lindner is aggressively seeking that position, but is facing a lot of push back as his basic preferences (no new debt, balanced budget) diverge quite a bit from those of the Greens and the SPD.

In terms of foreign policy, it is still too early to make any firm predictions. All the potential coalition partners support the basic premises of the postwar consensus including support for NATO and the European Union. The Greens, however, have questioned the necessity of raising Germany's defense spending to 2% of its GDP. They also emphasize human rights to a greater extent than the other parties, which may sharpen the future chancellor's rhetoric and policy towards countries like Russia, China, and Turkey—especially if the Greens take the foreign office. It is also an open question as to how supportive the new government will be towards the more ambitious plans to strengthen the supranational European level, particularly in terms of the nascent movement towards mutual debt.

All in all, the election results are a little paradoxical. On the one hand, despite repudiating Merkel's CDU, voters chose the leader who is most similar to her in temperament and centrist policy positioning. Scholz is a pragmatic, even center-right Social Democrat who will likely not countenance any major policy departures, working only for a slightly higher minimum wage, increased investment in "green" infrastructure, and speedier digitalization. On the other hand, the three-party coalition will be quite a departure from the previous model. The Greens and FDP are run by leaders of the younger generation, which also represents a large pool of their support. Even though the next coalition's policy agenda will likely not be radical, the sheer amount that will be done—and that the Merkel governments put off—could cumulatively represent real change.

Essay by Stephen F. Szabo, The BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University

New Era or Interregnum?

The German election of 2021 was *einmalige*, that is, unique or singular in many ways.[1] There were a number of firsts. This was the first election in the history of the Federal Republic which did not have an incumbent chancellor on the ballot. This reflects the remarkable stability of a German polity which has had only eight chancellors in its seventy-two-year history. Over the past thirty-nine years it has had only three chancellors, two of whom (Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel) each served sixteen years. While Germans do not want a *Fuehrer*, they want a pair of safe hands—as well as those of a *Mutti*. [2]This desire for stability and predictability is understandable in a country with such a turbulent and dark history, including the division of the nation for forty-one of those years. The absence of an incumbent, along with the decline of party identification, resulted in this most turbulent and unpredictable election.

The lack of an incumbent at the top of the ticket resulted in a great deal of fluidity which produced the first three-party ruling coalition since the early 1950s in a system that until now has had only two-party federal governments. This reflects the fragmentation of the party system from one with two and a half parties, consisting of two large *Volksparteien*, The Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), The Social Democrats (SPD) and the small Liberal party (FDP), to a five-party system in the 1990s with the rise of the Greens and the post-Communist Linke, to the current six-party system with the inclusion of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The election confirmed the demise of the two large people's parties, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, each of which received around a quarter of the vote. Three parties gained votes over the previous parliamentary election of 2021, the Greens (+5.8%), the SPD (+5.2%) and the FDP (+0.7%). The others lost support, led by the CDU/CSU (- 8.9%), Linke (-4.3%) and AfD (-2.3%). This has major implications for the cohesion and stability of governments going forward.

The Greens have emerged as the kingmaker or swing party in the new government. They and the Liberals also set another first by their decision to negotiate with each other before going to the larger party to form a coalition. While the move is unprecedented, it makes sense as the two together outpolled the two larger parties. As it is unthinkable for the CDU/CSU and the SPD to form yet another less-than-Grand Coalition, there is no real prospect of a government majority in the Bundestag without the Greens. The most likely outcome is what Germans call a traffic light coalition of red (SPD), Green, and Yellow (FDP). The demise of the Left party has taken away the possibility of a red-red-green option. While the FDP would prefer a so-called Jamaica coalition of black (CDU/CSU), green, and yellow, it is highly unlikely that the Greens would opt to allow the Christian Democrats to stay in power for yet another four years, especially given that the CDU/CSU lost the most votes and stand at the lowest level in their history. The Green party base would probably revolt over such a decision.

A traffic-light coalition would be good for German democracy but could be quite unstable. Democracy needs a turnover of elites and the CDU is clearly a spent force which needs time in the opposition. The Merkel years did not produce a

[1] (For an overview of the results see the data in https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Wahlen/Wahlanalysen/Newsl_Bund210927.pdf or https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/btw21/bundestagswahl-zahlen-101.html; for a comparison with the previous election see Eric Langenbacher, ed., *Twilight of the Merkel Era: Power and Politics in Germany After the 2017 Bundestag Election* (New York: Berghan, 2019).

[22] For an assessment of the Merkel years see Robin Alexander, *Machtverfall-Merkels Ende und das Drama der deutschen Politik: Ein Report* (Munich: Siedler, 2021; and Constanze Stelzenmueller, "The Singular Chancellor: The Merkel Method and Its Limits, *Foreign Affairs* 100:3 (May-June 2021); https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2021-04-20/angela-merkel-singular-chancellor: see also Stefan Kornelius, *Angela Merkel: The Chancellor and Her World* (Richmond: Alma, 2013).

clear successor and left the party without a clear message or strong leaders. The series of coalitions between the two biggest parties resulted in the rise of the far right AfD, which occupied the space on the right left by the Christian Democrats. They paradoxically reinvigorated the role, if not the quality, of debates within the Bundestag, as they used that forum to attack an oppositionless parliament.

The election demonstrated the growing "presidentialization" or "personalization" of German electoral politics; the SPD's victory was largely due to the relative popularity of its leading candidate, Finance Minister, Olaf Scholz. The weakness of both of his primary opponents, Armin Laschet of the CDU and Annalena Baerbock of the Greens, pushed the SPD to power despite real concerns about the leftward drift of the party. While Germans vote for a party and there is no direct vote for Chancellor, this election continued the trend during the Merkel years of many voters basing their decision on the lead candidate. While the newness and instability of the election may give pause, it holds the promise of renewal. The FDP and the Greens were supported by younger voters, while the two former *Volksparteien* relied on older voters. The major policy differences include fiscal policy and paying for climate change. This is party leader Christian Lindner's and perhaps the FDP's last chance to become relevant. They will not let it slip away again.

The east-west divide in voting remains an important factor and will need to be addressed by the new government. Both die Linke and the AfD lost votes from the previous election but while the AfD stabilized around 10 to 12 percent, die Linke is now below the crucial five percent line. Voter transfer data reveals that die Linke lost 820,000 votes to the SPD, 610,000 to the Greens and 110,00 to the AfD while the AfD only lost 70,000 to die Linke.[3] Both are parties of eastern Germany, but the Linke electorate is aging and consists of the losers of unification, eastern Germans who were middle aged or older when the Berlin Wall came down. The revival of the SPD attracted some who now see a realistic left alternative while the AfD continued as a party of largely eastern grievance. Thirty-two years after unification, the continued east-west divide remains a vulnerability for German democracy. While the AfD only polled 10.3 percent nationally it received a quarter of the vote in the eastern states of Thuringia and Saxony. It is here to stay but will no longer be the main opposition party in the Bundestag.

For non-Germans, the foreign policy implications are the most important outcome, even if foreign policy is almost never a factor in German elections. While the campaign was dominated by the coronavirus and, to a lesser extent, concerns about immigration, foreign policy was hardly mentioned although it will matter a great deal when the new government is formed. Like voters throughout the West, Germans focus on economic issues when they go to the polls. 2021 is no exception although economic and employment ranked third (22%) among voters following social security (28%) and climate (22%).

A number of key foreign policy issues did develop during the campaign including the American withdrawal from Afghanistan which became a major point of contention in Berlin. The Christian democratic candidate Armin Laschet went so far as to say it was the worst catastrophe in NATO's history. And there were calls for SPD Foreign Minister Maas to resign over his lack of anticipation and ability to get Germans and others out of Afghanistan. Although Chancellor Merkel made a visit to Russia and Ukraine, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline wasn't an issue of contention except for the Green Party. The pipeline and the broader relationship with Russia played very little role in the election itself, and while the Greens are critical of both Russia and China, there is little prospect for a major shift away from Germany's geo-economic or mercantilist approach to these two countries.[4] Defense policy is likely to become an issue for the transatlantic relationship as a traffic light coalition is unlikely to prioritize defense and the stationing of American

[3] Tagesschau, "Zahlen zur Bundestagswahl: So hat Deutschland gewählt," 26 September 2021, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/btw21/bundestagswahl-zahlen-101.html

[4] See Stephen F. Szabo, Germany, *Russia and the Rise of Geo-economics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

nuclear weapons in Germany could come into question. China policy will be central to the transatlantic relationship along with economic issues involving trade and the regulation of tech companies.

In a stunning role reversal, The German election demonstrated that the state of democracy is stronger in Germany than in the United States, the country which brought democracy back to Germany and most of the rest of Europe. Americans could learn a great deal from the German experience. While Germany has no term limits, its parliamentary form of federalism is superior to the presidential system in that it does not personalize politics in one person. The Chancellor is head of government but not head of state as in a Presidential system. The multiparty system also offers voters more choices and coalition governments minimize tendencies toward polarization. The lesser influence of social media combined with the larger role of mainstream media lessen the influence of disinformation as do stricter legal curbs on political speech. The strength of the political parties over individual candidates, which is enhanced by public financing of campaigns and the lower levels of social inequality are also advantages Germans have over Americans. Of course, historical memory matters as Germans have not forgotten where authoritarian systems can lead.[5]

The Germans may miss *Mutti* Merkel but she left a full plate of major challenges for the new government. Although German democracy is in good shape, the consensual nature of coalition government and an aging electorate sustained Merkel and her cautious style of leadership. However, in spite of the personalization of politics, the Chancellor is a chairperson of the board and weaker than a chief executive in presidential systems, and while this is an advantage in many respects, Merkel's legacy has resulted in Germany doubling down on what it does best while neglecting the need for adaptation to a rapidly changing economic and strategic environment. It lags in digitalization and failed to take advantage of low to negative interest rates to invest in infrastructure. Merkel avoided taking a leadership role on defense policy and leaves behind an underfunded and underequipped military at a time when the American commitment to European defense is clearly waning.[6] She was a cautious crisis manager in Europe but not more. The new government will have a new generation of leaders which will confront these challenges.

[5] For a detailed description of the German political system see Wolfgang Rudzio, *Das politische System der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015).

[6] Judy Dempsey, "Merkel's Silence Over Defense Will Haunt Her Successor," Carnegie Europe, 23 September 2021, https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/85406.

Essay by Sarah Wiliarty, Wesleyan University

Increased Personalization in the German 2021 Federal Elections

The results are in, the votes are counted, the governing coalition is taking shape. The 2021 German federal elections mark a point of enormous uncertainty in German politics. The party system is clearly in flux, as Germany continues its transition from a two-block system to a multiparty system.[1] Furthermore, we are likely seeing a shift to a more candidate-centric form of politics than has been true in the past. Changes in media coverage and the introduction of candidate debates contributed to a greater focus on candidates over parties.[2] Whether the shake-up in German domestic politics leads to innovation and productive policy making or just further instability remains to be seen.

Less than two weeks before the election, reports were that up to 40% of Germans remained undecided in their vote choice.[3] That statistic left open the possibility of a real surprise on election night—a surprise that did not emerge. Instead, the actual results mirrored opinion polls more or less as they stood in late August. But the last month of stability hid a prior year of disruption. Thinking back to January 2021, it looked very much as if the election was the Christian Democrats to lose. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU) had led the *Sonntagsfrage*[4] nearly continuously since the 2017 election.

The major shift in the party system since the 2017 election seemed to involve the Green Party taking over the role of prime contender on the left from the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Between October 2018 and August 2021, the Greens polled solidly ahead of the SPD, even on occasion outpolling the Christian Democrats. With the emergence of climate change as one of the most important issues in Germany, it was poised to be first European democracy with an environmental party as the main party on the left, and possibly even a Green Chancellor. Instead, the summer of 2021 brought the collapse in support of both the Christian Democrats and the Greens and the rise of the near-dead Social Democrats.

The dramatic change in the fortunes of the parties seems largely to have been driven by their choices of chancellor candidates. While these candidates have been an important factor in previous elections, the extent to which chancellor-candidate choices drove electoral results in this election is new. Note, the increasingly candidate-centric nature of the election is not based on any institutional change. Germans still vote for a local, constituency-level candidate with their first vote and for a party with their second vote.

[1] Oskar Niedermayer, "Von der Zweiparteiendominanz zum Pluralismus: Die Entwicklung des deutschen Parteiensystems im westeuropäischen Vergleich," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 51:1 (March 2010): 1-13.

[2] Carsten Reinemann and Jürgen, "It's the Debates, Stupid! How the Introduction of Televised Debates Changed the Portrayal of Chancellor Candidates in the German Press, 1949–2005," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12:4 (October 2007): 92-111; Christina Holtz-Bacha, Ana Ines Langer, Susanne Merkle, "The Personalization of Politics in Comparative Perspective: Campaign Coverage in Germany and the United Kingdom," *European Journal of Communication* 29:2 (January 2014): 153-170.

[3] Michael Nienaber and Gareth Jones, "German Election Too Close to Call as Many Voters Still Undecided," 14 September 2021, *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-election-too-close-call-many-voters-still-undecided-2021-09-14/

[4] The weekly poll asking Germans who they would vote for if the election were held next Sunday. All polling data in this essay is taken from the *Sonntagsfrage*.

Of the three parties that designated chancellor candidates, the Social Democrats made their choice first, back in August 2020. Unlike 2017, the SPD experienced almost no "bounce" in the polls at the moment of candidate selection. The decision to designate a chancellor candidate early was strategic, based on party leaders' belief that the early timing would create party unity. Whether due to the timing of the selection or some other factor, the SPD did seem to exhibit greater unity than previously and also greater unity than other leading parties throughout the campaign.

The choice of chancellor candidate was most problematic for the Christian Democrats. For the first time since 2005, Chancellor Angela Merkel was not standing for re-election. In the absence of an incumbent chancellor, the CDU party chair would be a natural potential contender. However, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's successor as party chair, resigned in early 2020 in the wake of her poor handling of the Thuringia state-level parliamentary election. The CDU eventually chose a new chair in January 2021. The three-way contest included Friedrich Merz, Norbert Röttgen, and Armin Laschet. After Röttgen was eliminated in the first round, Laschet beat Merz, 53% to 47%.[5] Laschet and Merz represent different wings of the party. Laschet, Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, the country's largest state, represented continuity with Merkel's vision of the CDU as a party of the center. Merz, on the other hand, is more conservative. He had a notable break with Merkel and was seen as someone who would take the CDU back toward the right of the political spectrum. The CDU is split on the question of whether to continue Merkel's positioning of the party in the political center or to return to the party's more conservative past.[6] Often the party chair election is nearly unanimous. This time, the 53 to 47 percent split revealed the internal divisions of the CDU, not just in terms of personnel but also on the party's future direction.

Having settled on Laschet as leader of the CDU, the Christian Democrats still had to pick a chancellor candidate. The two Christian Democratic 'sister parties'—the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union – do not campaign against each other, with the CSU active only in the state of Bavaria. They maintain separate organizations and separate leaderships. The Christian Democrats do not have an institutionalized process for selecting a joint chancellor candidate and the sister parties have sometimes struggled with this issue in the past.

2021 is proving to be a year of enormous tension between the CDU and the CSU. Marcus Söder, chair of the CSU, also had his eye on the Chancellorship. Söder is more conservative than Merkel on social issues, but he has a strong track record on working with the Green party on the environment. With the Greens doing well in the polls, Söder seemed like a possible leader of a future Christian Democratic/Green coalition. However, in mid-April the CDU's national party board voted 31 to 9 in favor of Laschet. That was enough for Söder to back down in his pursuit of the Chancellorship, but he has been critical of Laschet ever since. Over the summer, Laschet's candidacy floundered. Initially he was simply seen as uninspiring and boring. But in late summer, he was caught on camera laughing while Federal President Steinmeier offered condolences to the victims of Germany's severe flooding. This gaffe fit with a more general perception that Laschet is not a serious person and that he is not competent to lead the country. The CDU/CSU election result of barely 24% was catastrophic. Infighting among factions continues, particularly between Laschet and Söder, to the detriment of both sister parties.

For the first time ever, the Greens decided to put forward a chancellor candidate as well. The Green Party traditionally has two leaders, a man and a woman. Since the party has never previously been close to winning the Chancellorship, it has never picked an official candidate. In 2021, however, the Greens had been polling well enough to have an outside chance of winning more seats in the Bundestag than any other party. A Green chancellor was a long shot, but not an

[5] Jean Lotus, "Armin Laschet, Merkel Ally, Elected Head of Germany's CDU Party," 16 January 2021, *World News*, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/01/16/Armin-Laschet-Merkel-ally-elected-head-of-Germanys-CDU-party/4291610822786/.

[6] Sarah Wiliarty, "Germany: How the Christian Democrats Manage to Adapt to the Silent Revolution," in Tim Bale, ed., *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 141-169).

impossibility. Between the party co-chairs, Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock, the Green party leadership chose Baerbock. Initially she was well received, as a sort of younger and greener Merkel, but Baerbock turned out to be a much less successful candidate than expected. She was accused of plagiarism and possible financial mismanagement. All in all, she presented a much less professional view of herself than had been hoped. The Greens had never mounted a campaign for chancellor before and the task seems to have been overwhelming to them. Some of the mistakes were perhaps the result of misogyny against a young, female candidate. On the other hand, Baerbock went to the flood region to meet with victims but did not take any journalists with her.[7] That might be an admirable move in some ways but was not a good way to win votes.

Party fortunes changed dramatically over the course of the summer. The decline in support for the Greens began from a peak in early May of around 26% to their election result of just under 15%. The Christian Democrats' descent began later, in early July, and they lost about 6 percentage points, moving from 30% to 24%. It is only after support for the other two parties began to drop that the SPD's numbers began to rise, moving from around 16% in late July to just under 26%.[8] The increase in Social Democratic support appears to have been due almost entirely to Scholz being viewed as the most viable Chancellor, rather than to a sudden attraction of voters to the tenets of social democracy. Notably, none of the parties promoted new policies during this time period. None of them emphasized new issues. Even the summer flooding did not turn into a major campaign issue, except for Laschet's gaffe of laughing during Steinmeier's speech. Instead, the dramatic swing in outcomes was based almost entirely on candidate reception among voters. The exact effects of the increased personalization of German politics is hard to predict, but it is likely to contribute even more volatility to a political system already in flux.

[7] Melissa Eddy, "German Candidates Fail to Find Footing in Flood Response," 21 July 2021, *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/21/world/europe/germany-floods-politics-election-candidates-laschet.html.

[8] Wilko Zicht and Matthias Cantow, "Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: Wenn am nächsten Sonntag Bundestagswahl wäre …," n.d., https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/politbarometer.htm