

Can the German Greens benefit from a Merkel-less CDU?

The German Greens have selected Annalena Baerbock as their candidate for German chancellor ahead of the country's federal elections in September. Marco Bitschnau writes that with the ruling CDU plagued by scandals and internal divisions, there is now a viable chance that Baerbock could lead the next government.

On 14 March, the German Greens (shorthand for *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*) celebrated what was arguably their greatest ever success. In the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, best known for picturesque Black Forest villages, powerful car manufacturers, and a notoriously Pietist-conservative population, they not only became the strongest party again with a record result of 32.6%, but also surpassed Angela Merkel's CDU (their junior coalition partner since 2016) by a margin of 8.5 percentage points. It was nothing less than a [show of strength](#) – and another humiliation for the CDU in its traditional southwestern stronghold. The party that has led all state governments between 1953 and 2011 was once again forced to concede defeat to an opponent they had long refused to take seriously enough.

Ups and downs

There are many reasons why the Greens prevailed in the South. One is their incumbent Minister-President Winfried Kretschmann, a popular 72-year-old former teacher who was [swept to power](#) by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster ten years ago. A member of the Maoist *Communist League of West Germany* in his youth, Kretschmann, with his distinctively Swabian accent and grandfatherly appearance, has turned into the [poster boy](#) of a [new Green pragmatism](#) that is unafraid of reaching across the ideological aisle.

It is this pragmatism that has grown increasingly attractive to a centrist electorate otherwise favouring the CDU or the liberal FDP, and that has led the Greens into coalitions with both. In recent years, they have agreed to such alliances in the federal states of Hesse and Schleswig-Holstein, leaving no doubt that they want to emancipate themselves from the rigid bloc logic (CDU-FDP vs SPD-Greens) that has defined German party politics for most of the post-war era.

This emancipation was in large part enabled by the SPD's *Babylonian captivity* in an [unpopular grand coalition](#) and the fallout from the climate crisis. Particularly the impact of the latter cannot be overstated: whereas the Greens were polling around 11% in June 2018, they rose to an all-time high of 27% during the climate protests the summer thereafter.

They are peaking too early, many political observers feared, and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2020 seemed to prove them right. Once the virus had tightened its grip on Europe, it soon became evident that this was a crisis benefitting the governing parties – just like other crises that the public experiences as immediate, instantaneous, and unanticipated, it engendered a *rally around the flag effect* of [considerable proportions](#). Likewise, it became evident that global warming, as important as it may be in principle, cannot compete for attention during a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. For the Greens, this meant falling poll numbers at a time when they were hoping to establish a new pecking order within the German centre-left.

Coalition games

They eventually recovered a little and now once again poll ahead of the SPD by a few percentage points (e.g., 7% at Kantar, 5% at GMS and 3.5% at Allensbach in recent polls). Yet the situation remains rather volatile, and party strategists are planning for different scenarios come September. The single [most likely](#) scenario is a narrow CDU/CSU victory in conjunction with a strong Green performance, followed by a Black-Green coalition that would focus on enacting bolder climate policies and continue the *Merkelian* project of gradual modernisation. This is the outcome expected by most but not preferred by all.

Especially the leftist wing of the Greens, mostly located in the Northern and Eastern states, is still beating the drum for a so called 'Red-Red-Green' or 'Green-Red-Red' coalition with the SPD and the socialist Left (*Die Linke*). And a 'traffic light coalition', where the Left would be swapped for the FDP, is also considered an [increasingly realistic alternative](#). Both of these options have their advantages in theory (as they would leave the Greens leading the government) but would possibly rely on razor-thin majorities and entail a range of secondary complications. The Left's reliability and willingness to compromise has been repeatedly doubted, and the FDP could feel outnumbered and pushed aside by two larger centre-left coalition partners.

Other post-election scenarios are scarce, the most obvious being the continuation of the grand coalition. In theory, both parties would have good reasons to at least consider this possibility: by maintaining the *status quo*, the CDU could calm troubled waters and the SPD avoid the loss of cabinet representation (and thus relevance). However, at this point, such arguments seem in vain – the end of the grand coalition is widely regarded as a *fait accompli*, and it would require a lot to change this view.

Neither the respective party bases nor the public would be likely to accept a *more of the same* message after substantial election losses. But since all other options are either modifications of the grand coalition (e.g., CDU-SPD-FDP) or have been ruled out emphatically (e.g., CDU-FDP-AfD), it still remains the most realistic alternative to Green government participation. Put differently, even the most probable coalition without the Greens is exceedingly improbable. All they need to do is avoid mistakes and seize the moment on Election Day.

Eyes on the chancellery

Yet, before this, they had to answer one essential question: who their candidate for chancellor would be. This is not a formal position, as the chancellor is elected by parliament and MPs are under no obligation to cast their (secret) ballots for their party's nominee. But the expectation that the person selected as the candidate will lead the government if a majority can be secured is hardly ever contested.

Most often, the honour of being chosen falls to the respective party leader, but exceptions to this rule are not uncommon. A prominent example in 2021 is the SPD, who have announced vice-chancellor Olaf Scholz as their candidate, [giving him preference](#) over co-leaders Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans. The CDU came close to following suit by sidelining [newly elected leader](#) Armin Laschet in favour of the more prolific, popular, and ambitious Markus Söder (leader of the CSU). However, the party ultimately backed Laschet in a [vote on 20 April](#).

In any case, Merkel's successor will face a tough campaign, for the departure of the successful four-term chancellor bears severe electoral risks for the CDU. With her statesmanlike appearance and unpretentious style, Merkel [attracted many](#) who would probably not have voted for her party on ideological grounds alone – and who could now reconsider their choice. The fickle loyalty of these *Wechselwähler*innen* may have provided the Greens with additional motivation to field their own chancellor candidate for the first time in history.

On 19 April, they announced co-party leader Annalena Baerbock, a political scientist, international lawyer, and expert on climate policy, as their candidate. To many casual observers, the decision to select Baerbock came as a surprise – they had expected the nomination of her fellow party leader Robert Habeck instead. A professional writer with a PhD in literature studies, [Habeck](#) served for more than eight years in the state government of Schleswig-Holstein, which provided him, in addition to greater name recognition, with valuable governing experience that Baerbock lacked. But, in the end, the 40-year-old mother of two proved that massive intra-party support and strong political instincts can be more important qualities.

Not that Baerbock and Habeck are that different. Both represent an adaptive and refreshingly non-ideological style that contrasts with the intransigency of the post-Schröder years. And both are aware of their historical opportunity to [replace the SPD](#) as Germany's foremost centre-left force and possibly even win the chancellorship by appealing to the centrist voters the CDU needs to retain at all costs. This does not mean that traditional *Green politics* will be neglected, but rather that the ongoing transformation from an ecologist niche party into a proper *Volkspartei* has to be adequately reflected on the campaign trail.

The Greens have a strong hand, and if they play it right, they could make history in September. No doubt the CDU is aware of this, as its reaction has proven to be increasingly erratic. Plagued by a [series of corruption scandals](#), lacking orientation, and facing the most dangerous challenger in more than fifteen years, one can easily imagine its quarrelling leadership nervously glancing at the (prophetic?) lines of Emily Dickinson, who once wrote that '*the colour of the grave is green – the outer grave – I mean...*'

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