

Does Merkel's coalition spat prefigure a change in the German party system?



The alliance between Angela Merkel's CDU and their Bavarian sister party, the CSU, has come under strain over the German government's immigration policies. [Ben Margulies](#) writes that while most of the coverage of the CDU-CSU dispute has focused on what it means for Merkel's government, it provides some insights into the potential future trajectory of the German party system.



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In the ten months since the last German federal election, many political observers have concluded that Angela Merkel's time as the leader of Germany and Europe may be [coming to an end](#). Her conservative coalition won a dismal 33 percent of the vote in September 2017; forced into another "grand coalition" with the reluctant Social Democrats (SPD) after protracted negotiations, her new government only took office in March. Three months later, one of its constituent parties nearly brought down her government over immigration controls. Though many onlookers will be wondering what this means for Chancellor Merkel, it is also worth looking at what it means for the German party system, and for the structure of European politics.

Germany's main conservative/Christian-democratic "party", the CDU/CSU, is a coalition of two parties. The Christian Democratic Union (the CDU part) operates in 15 of Germany's 16 states – this is Merkel's party. The Christian Social Union (the CSU part) operates in Bavaria alone, preserving its regional identity and Bavaria's [especially strong attachment](#) to the Roman Catholic Church. The two parties operate together in federal elections; the CDU usually provides the common candidate for chancellor.

The refugee crisis of 2015, and Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders, led to a serious breach between the CDU and CSU. The CSU [demanded](#) a cap on the number of refugees admitted annually during the 2017-18 coalition negotiations. Finally, in June 2018, the CSU interior minister, Horst Seehofer, [unveiled a plan](#) that would allow Germany to unilaterally turn back asylum-seekers at the border so long as they were registered in another EU state. Merkel refused any unilateral actions, seeking an EU agreement on migration. Seehofer threatened to order these exclusions anyway, and [offered his resignation on 1 July](#), despite Merkel gaining some concessions from other European states on returning asylum-seekers. Only a [last-minute deal](#) saved the alliance.

For Merkel, the CSU's withdrawal would have meant an end to the parliamentary majority for her fourth government, meaning she would either have had to find a new coalition partner (likely the Greens or the FDP) or seek new elections. But the CSU's threatened withdrawal over the immigration issue also suggests deeper changes to the German party system, changes that reflect phenomena elsewhere in Europe.

Historically, German politics has been organised around two main "cleavages" or institutionalised conflicts. The first is between the secular and the religious, which is why Germany's main right-wing parties are "Christian". The second, common to almost all Western European states, is between labour and the bourgeoisie, the class, socioeconomic or "left-right" cleavage – the CDU/CSU and the Free Democrats were bourgeois, and the Social Democrats working class. The rise of environmentalism and social liberalism brought in the Greens.

Many [scholars described](#) the Greens as part of a "new politics" focused on "post-materialist" issues relating to the environment, individual rights and autonomy and democracy. More recently, this "new politics" dimension has become part of a larger social argument about whether a society is, to borrow [Emmanuel Macron's phrase](#), "open" or "closed" – that is, whether a nation embraces globalisation of goods and people, social and political liberalism, and transnational governance, or whether it seeks hard borders, a more closed economy, national sovereignty and a homogenous, illiberal society. In Europe, Hooghe and Marks argue that [we are seeing](#) "a new transnational cleavage that has at its core a cultural conflict pitting libertarian, universalistic values against the defence of nationalism and particularism".

This new cleavage has been reshaping European politics and party systems. In France, it marks the key difference between the two presidential contenders in the 2017 presidential run-off – the cosmopolitan Macron vs. the communitarian Le Pen. Macron's party, *La République En Marche!*, effectively dominates the cosmopolitan side of the conflict, while Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* covers the anti-immigrant ([or populist radical-right](#)) wing of the anti-liberals, and *La France Insoumise* the left-populist challenge. The old left- and right-wing parties, the Socialists and the Republicans, are severely weakened.

In Germany, the traditional party system seemed much more stable, because for a long time, Germany had no successful radical-right party. But since the middle part of this decade, the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) has emerged to take this role. It has [tended to draw](#) non-voters, far-right voters, and defectors from the centre-right (and centre-left, sometimes) to its ranks. As no mainstream party will ally with the Europhobic AfD, its emergence has forced mainstream German parties that are usually enemies to form coalitions, [both at the state level](#) and now federally via the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that the real battle in German politics is between cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans.

As this conflict grows, some of the formerly mainstream parties have redefined themselves as more hostile to immigration, rearranging the party system as they go. Although Hooghe and Marks note that established parties tend to be slow to adapt themselves to novel issues and cleavages, it does seem that mainstream parties are taking clearer views on the globalisation-nationalism spectrum, especially regarding the issues of immigration and border security. To again use France as an example, the French centre-right 'Republicans', have been adopting ever harsher stances towards immigrants since Nicolas Sarkozy was a minister in the 2000s. Now that Macron has effectively monopolised cosmopolitanism, The Republicans have [begun to use](#) more radical-right populist language under their new leader, Laurent Wauquiez.

What is interesting about the German situation is that the centre-right is not taking a unified stance on this new demarcation-integration cleavage. Merkel, leader of the Christian Democrats, is maintaining a strong commitment to Europe and to being relatively open to immigrants. The CSU are adopting a much more restrictionist, closed policy. The German liberal party, the Free Democrats, [have also hinted at greater hostility to immigrants](#) (or at least their current leader has), and some hostility to any Eurozone reform that might lead to Germany transferring money elsewhere.

What does this mean for the German party system? What we've seen in France is a near-total realignment of the party system along the closed-open divide. In Germany, a split between the CDU and CSU would certainly seem to presage a similar reshuffling of the party system. The fact that the CDU, SPD and Greens all hold roughly centrist positions on socioeconomic issues and are committed to Europe create the basis for a "cosmopolitan" camp. On the "protectionist" side, things are more unsettled. The AfD is clearly there. The CSU and the FDP are somewhere between the AfD's position on borders and community and the centrist parties, since parties are slow to make major changes in their policies and identities.

It is also possible that the CDU could shift right as the CSU is doing. Merkel is unpopular among right-wingers within its ranks, some of whom – notably [Jens Spahn](#), her health minister – could pull the party to the right. That said, the rift between the CDU and CSU over this issue could complicate such a manoeuvre.

The key questions for Germany's future, then, are first, who replaces Merkel, and second, whether the CSU and Free Democrats (and maybe the CDU) move further towards the AfD, or whether the AfD remains alone on the right-wing protectionist fringe. If they do, the party system would totally realign, to the point where the three of them together could form a governing coalition of populists, as in Italy. If not, we'd continue to see Germany dominated by a cluster of four or five mainstream parties, but parties which become increasingly hard to distinguish as "left" or "right" because the AfD's presence forces them to make novel coalition alliances. Either way, the prized stability of German politics has become part of Germany's crowded past. Unlike other aspects of German history, it will be very much missed.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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