

Kanzlerwahlverein no more? Failed internal coalition

building and the CDU/CSU's 2021 campaign.

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Abstract. Germany's Christian Democrats suffered their worst election defeat in a post-war German federal election. This article looks at the campaign that preceded this downfall. While the CDU's party congress in early 2021 showed promising signs for a successful campaign, the newly elected party leader Armin Laschet missed the opportunity to integrate the CDU's different wings and consolidate a coalition that backed his leadership, which set the stage for the damaging battle with the CSU over the chancellor candidacy. Ongoing internal disunity resulted in an unbalanced manifesto and conflicting policy signals. Laschet only attempted to rectify this very late in the campaign, without his team, however, integrating the CDU/CSU's most important actors. The Christian Democrats were thus ill-equipped to respond to a difficult context and unexpected developments. Returning to the practice of internal coalition building will be paramount for the CDU/CSU to move on from this historic defeat.

Keywords: 2021 Bundestag election; Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), election campaign; factionalism; political parties

Introduction

The 2021 Bundestag election marked the worst federal election result in the history of Germany's Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). Losing an unprecedented 8.8 percent, the CDU and CSU combined received only 24.1 percent of the votes and dropped below its previously worst result of 31.0 percent in 1949. Only for the third time in post-war German history, the Christian Democrats did not become the strongest group in the German *Bundestag*, falling behind a resurgent Social Democratic Party. This came after an unusually rapid downfall. Initially praised for the government's handling of the Covid pandemic, the CDU and CSU spent most of 2020 with a comfortable lead in the polls, at times polling more than twice the strength of the second strongest party. By early 2021, the Christian Democrats looked like the certain winner of the upcoming election. However, within less than two months, they were caught in a downward trend that the CDU/CSU proved unable to reverse until election day (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Polls between the 2017 and 2021 Bundestag election

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Source: Polls by Infratest dimap and Forschungsgruppe Wahlen via Wahlrecht.de.

What had happened? The 2021 Bundestag election was certainly unusual. For the first time since the end of World War II, an incumbent chancellor was not seeking re-election. Angela Merkel's declaration to not seek a fifth consecutive term was seen as a relief by many Christian Democrats at that time but also left them without the typical incumbency bonus. Moreover, after 16 consecutive years in office, the Christian Democrats faced pressure to resharpen their programmatic profile. It left their chancellor candidate Armin Laschet with the invidious task of articulating a vision for renewal without criticizing the government's own

track-record. Laschet himself also proved to be an unpopular candidate, facing criticism for blunders on the campaign trail and opposition from both within his own party and the Bavarian CSU. Finally, a series of corruption scandals, the disastrous flooding in July 2021, and growing dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Covid pandemic added to a difficult situation for the CDU and CSU.

This article aims to provide a structured account of the CDU/CSU's 2021 campaign. It will primarily focus on the CDU but also discuss the party's relationship with the CSU. Its main argument is that, after years, the CDU eventually paid the prize for neglecting its long-established practice of internal coalition-making. While integrating diverse interests had traditionally been one of the party's main strengths, the conflict between a disgruntled conservative right, a disillusioned left, and an increasingly isolated center substantively weakened the CDU and sabotaged its campaign. The article will outline this argument in three steps. First, the CDU's party congress in January 2021 showed promising signs for a successful campaign, but the newly elected party leader Armin Laschet missed the opportunity to integrate the different wings and consolidate a coalition that backed his leadership. This set the stage for the damaging battle with the CSU over the chancellor candidacy. Second, ongoing internal disunity resulted in a vague and unbalanced manifesto and conflicting policy signals. Third, Laschet only attempted to rectify this very late in the campaign. His team, however, failed to integrate most of the CDU/CSU's most important actors. The Christian Democrats were thus ill-equipped to turn things around after the disastrous flood in Western Germany and the unexpected resurgence of the SPD as their main rival for the chancellorship. After briefly embedding this election within the development of the CDU before 2021, the article will focus on each of these three points in turn. The last section will conclude that

returning to the practice of internal coalition building will be paramount for the CDU and CSU to move on from this historic defeat.

The CDU before the 2021 campaign

To get things done, party leaders typically rely on an internal coalition that brings together actors with vital professional knowledge, financial resources, and relations and recognition both within and outside the party.¹ The infighting marring the Christian Democrats' 2021 campaign seems particularly surprising given the CDU's traditional reputation as a "*Kanzlerwahlverein*." The term refers to a club whose main reason for existing is to get its leader elected to the chancellorship – a purpose to which all other actors and branches within the party would submit.² More recent work has nuanced this picture by showing that even during the heights of Adenauer's leadership, the CDU was comprised of a set of competing groups.³ These groups were typically part of three main wings: an 1) internal left, which was rooted in the social-Catholic labor movement and, over time, also came to include more culturally liberal views, 2) an economically and culturally moderate center, and 3) a fiscally and culturally conservative right.⁴ While changes in their size and in the coalitions between them often facilitated party change, none of them was relegated to the backseat for long.⁵ In fact, integrating all three wings, often through their incorporation among the party's office holders and candidates, became a fundamental principle within the CDU.⁶ This practice has persisted well into the 21st century and notably shaped the party's reform process during the early Merkel years.⁷

However, the CDU's long tenure in office has put pressure on its internal coalition-making. Continuous electoral success often entails growing competition within the party over the spoils of victory, especially when a party brings together very different social and political

groups.⁸ Internal frictions within a party leadership accused of running out of political ideas and failing to incorporate the interests of the different wings had already characterized the end of Helmut Kohl's tenure.⁹ Similar signs re-emerged the longer Angela Merkel was in office. Abandoning long-held positions on socio-cultural issues and, to a lesser extent, socio-economic issues provoked increasing criticism from market liberals and social conservatives. The Merkel government's bailout policies during the Euro crisis and acceptance of over one million refugees into Germany in 2015/16 intensified this criticism and resulted in heavy conflicts both with the CSU and within the CDU itself.¹⁰ They culminated in Merkel's resignation as party leader in 2018.

The CDU's centrist leadership faced pressure from both its internal right and left. On the right, the rise of Jens Spahn and especially Friedrich Merz's political comeback in 2018 provided all those with a unifying figure who saw the departure from free-market and socially conservative positions as the driver behind the rise of the Alternative for Germany.¹¹ In contrast, the CDU's internal left demanded the party's urgent modernization. They could point out that the AfD was not the only threat to the CDU.¹² In fact, since the 2017 Bundestag election, the Christian Democrats lost more voters to the Greens than to the AfD in 6 out of 12 elections (Table 1). While the AfD has particularly attracted former CDU voters in East Germany, the Greens have done so in West Germany. This was not a new challenge for the Christian Democrats. In the 1950s, they had to respond to the rise of different parties in different states, and integrating all party wings was an important step in doing so.¹³

[TABLE 1 HERE]

A promising start and early signs of trouble

Its party congress in January 2021 suggested that the CDU might again be able to integrate views on the right, left, and center. It became Germany's first major party to organize a digital party congress at which delegates would elect the party's new leadership online. Providing a highly professional and smooth delivery, it underlined the party's ambition to improve its reputation on the issue of digitalization.¹⁴ The CDU also continued (gradually) improving female representation among its leadership. 17 out of 40 members that the delegates elected to the party's leadership board were women (i.e. 42.5 percent). Although the CDU's top leaders continued to be predominantly male, with no candidate for the position of party leader and only 3 out of 17 state party leaders being female, this was one of the highest levels of female representation on its leadership board in the party's history.¹⁵ The average age of board members also decreased, in particular thanks to the election of Wiebke Winter (24 years), Anna Kreye (26 years), and Laura Hopmann (31 years).¹⁶ Finally, the catchphrase "ecology and economy" had the potential to "not leave the [political] center to the Greens",¹⁷ while also addressing the concerns of the CDU's right wing.¹⁸

The newly elected party leader Armin Laschet was a promising candidate to build a broad internal coalition. Coming from the CDU's largest state branch and Germany's most populous state, Laschet had roots in North Rhine-Westphalia's industrial heartland. Showing his father's miner tag during his party congress speech, he reassured those on the CDU's social Catholic left as well as those fearing that the turn toward renewable energy sources would come at the cost of job losses. At the same time, Laschet could point toward having initiated (albeit late) North Rhine-Westphalia's coal phaseout in 2018.¹⁹ This in addition to his support for Merkel's refugee policy and his involvement in the so-called "pizza connection"²⁰ likely

resonated with the CDU's centrist and progressive wing. Finally, Laschet was leading (and quite smoothly so) Germany's last remaining CDU-FDP government. Together with his opposition to same sex marriage, refusal to liberalize Germany's restrictive euthanasia laws, and law-and-order rhetoric, this made him relatable for the party's conservative wing.²¹ His party congress speech was a masterpiece of factional integration. He promised not a "one-man show" but a team, in which "everyone could shine."²² His record of leading a state cabinet that included market-liberal, conservative, and Christian-social ministers seemed to make him the right candidate to mediate between the CDU's internal wings.

Prior to the party congress, Laschet had already formed an alliance with Jens Spahn, and he seemed to continue the internal coalition-building after his election. Norbert Röttgen, who had been running on a reformist-progressive platform and was eliminated in the first round of the leadership vote, was elected to the CDU's presidium. Laschet subsequently brought the other contender in the leadership race, Friedrich Merz, into his campaign team.²³ At the membership level, Laschet joined numerous video conferences with local party branches to close ranks with the party's rank-and-file²⁴ and discuss digitalization and climate change as key areas for the joint CDU/CSU manifesto.²⁵ To convince those in the Merz camp skeptical about mediating between environmental protection and economic growth, Laschet emphasized the need to invest in "future-oriented technologies", make Germany a global leader in hydrogen fuel, and advance the decarbonization of the steel industry.²⁶ For the social-Catholic left, he emphasized the importance of the equality of opportunity in realizing entrepreneurial potential.²⁷

However, there were early signs of trouble. Starting an election year with a contested leadership election was in itself an unusual occurrence for the CDU. Party elites had usually

avoided contested elections by informally agreeing on how to incorporate different interests (Figure 2). The 2021 contest exposed the CDU's internal divisions quite visibly. At the elite level, party elites openly endorsed different candidates (e.g. speaker Wolfgang Schäuble endorsing Merz, Spahn endorsing Laschet).²⁸ Polls painted a similar picture among CDU supporters,²⁹ and an article published just before the party congress echoed such divisions among the delegates.³⁰ Laschet's narrow victory in the run-off against Merz (52 to 47 percent) showed how internally divided the party was.

Figure 2: Vote share of the winning candidate, CDU party leader elections 1950 to 2021.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Source: Konrad Kühne (2016) *Wahl der Vorsitzenden der CDU auf den Bundesparteitagen und Parteitag der CDU Deutschland*. Archive for Christian Democratic Policy, and own research. Vertical lines indicate the election of a new leader.

Already shortly after the party congress, Laschet irritated those on the party's internal left by declaring that Merz rather than Röttgen had been his preferred choice for the last remaining seat on the CDU presidium.³¹ Merz also remained the only person for months that Laschet named as a member of his team. Some delay in announcing the "team" he had promised might have been strategic to fuel speculations about who might be considered and thus incentivize party elites to rally behind him.³² However, by continuing to delay his decision, Laschet irritated his fellow CDU elites and refused to engage with some of the party's internal tensions. Frictions also quickly emerged between Laschet and the party's internal right as Merz and the market-liberal *Mittelstand* faction accused the new CDU leadership of being too passive in response to the pandemic and of lacking leadership in the development of the party's manifesto.³³

The failure to close the ranks within the CDU is crucial to understand the battle that followed over the chancellor candidacy. As in all federal elections since 1949, the CDU and CSU nominated a joint chancellor candidate. The nomination had usually been relatively straightforward, with the CDU leader being nominated in 16 of 19 previous elections. The CSU only had a serious chance when the CDU leader did not have the unequivocal support of her party, as happened in 1980, 2002, and 2021.³⁴

A series of corruption scandals and the CDU's defeats in the Southwestern state elections seemed to support the nomination of CSU leader Markus Söder. The allegations against a CDU parliamentarian for accepting bribes from the Azerbaijan government and against three other parliamentarians (two from the CDU, one from the CSU) for having personally benefited from government deals to procure face masks brought back memories of the CDU's 1999 donation scandal.³⁵ It is unclear how much these events influenced the election results in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate since many voters had probably already voted by mail when the scandals erupted. Still, the CDU plummeted to their worst ever result in both states. Although CDU elites rightly highlighted the incumbent governors' high level of popularity as an important factor in these defeats,³⁶ the results added to the Christian Democrats' concerns over voters' growing dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic.³⁷ With the confirmation of the SPD-FDP-Green coalition in Rhineland-Palatinate and initial discussions about such a coalition in Baden-Württemberg, speculations grew that this constellation could also send the Christian Democrats into opposition at the national level.³⁸ Against this backdrop, Söder could point to his much better approval ratings compared to Laschet to suggest that he would be the right candidate to turn things around (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Share of respondents very satisfied/satisfied with...

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Source: ARD-DeutschlandTREND, Infratest dimap.

Following the escalation of his conflict with Laschet over the response to Germany's third Covid wave,³⁹ Söder finally stated his ambition to become chancellor candidate in April. He enjoyed notable support among the CDU/CSU's supporters, parliamentarians, and membership in several states beyond Bavaria.⁴⁰

With Laschet refusing to back down, the Christian Democrats' lack of procedures to select their lead candidate became a serious problem. In 2002, Angela Merkel and Edmund Stoiber had privately agreed on Stoiber's candidacy.⁴¹ In 1980, a contested vote within the CDU/CSU's parliamentary caucus brought the decision in favor of CSU leader Franz-Josef Strauß.⁴² It was to the parliamentary caucus that Söder and Laschet turned next. The parliamentarians overwhelmingly supported Söder on 13 April. Laschet's supporters almost exclusively came from his own state of North Rhine-Westphalia.⁴³ A new Forsa poll published on 14 April further supported Söder, with respondents considering him more dynamic (36 percent to 4 percent for Laschet), more trustworthy (27 to 12 percent), and the stronger leader (57 to 4 percent).⁴⁴ Pressure increased from the Christian Democrats' youth movement and several state party leaders to settle the nomination.⁴⁵

After several conversations between Laschet and Söder had failed to generate agreement, both candidates met with a small group of close allies in the night between 18 and 19 April to break the impasse. According to journalists' accounts,⁴⁶ Wolfgang Schäuble, a long-standing member of the CDU leadership, outlined in that meeting that the CDU was in no shape to leave the candidacy to the CSU. Failing to secure the nomination would aggravate the CDU's

internal divisions, underline the party's current weakness, and likely result in yet another leadership race. Bypassing the CDU leadership by insisting on a caucus vote to settle the nomination would only intensify the likely political fallout.

While CDU leaders denied accounts that they had threatened to not support a Söder campaign,⁴⁷ the CSU delegation must have walked away from this meeting convinced that they could not force a decision without involving the CDU leadership. Around midday on 19 April, Söder declared at a press conference that he would follow any decision taken by the CDU's elected committees, basically handing the decision to the CDU leadership board. He might have calculated that the board would be unable to ignore Söder's popularity among CDU supporters and parliamentarians.

Indeed, while the CDU's leadership board eventually nominated Laschet when meeting later that day, leaked insights evidenced the extent to which he lacked broad support within his party. Several members, including Laschet's former leadership rival Norbert Röttgen, called on Laschet to leave the candidacy to Söder. Others, like his predecessor Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, supported Laschet either out of reservations against Söder or fear of the repercussions for the CDU. With Laschet insisting on a decision, discussions dragged on for hours.⁴⁸ While several board members wanted an indicative vote among the party's local branches before taking any decision, Laschet insisted on an immediate vote, which caused further turmoil since there were no procedures in place for such a vote. Faced with the risk of another leadership race in an election year and after 7.5 hours, the board ultimately endorsed Laschet's nomination with 31 to 9 votes and 6 abstentions.⁴⁹

Ongoing disunity and conflicting policy statements

Despite Söder's popularity, there were additional arguments at that time against nominating the CSU leader. Except for his consistent support for tough Covid restrictions (an issue on which Laschet was much more ambiguous),⁵⁰ Söder had a record of programmatic flip-flopping. He had initially been one of the loudest critics of Merkel's refugee policies and adopted right-wing positions to prevent an AfD breakthrough in Bavaria.⁵¹ When this strategy failed in Bavaria's 2018 election, Söder abandoned the hardline stance on asylum rights and immigration, became a vocal Merkel supporter, and presented himself as a progressive environmentalist.⁵² This political inconsistency provided room for the Greens and the SPD to attack Söder's credibility. In comparison, Laschet had a reputation for consistency and reliability.⁵³

Just when Laschet's approval ratings started improving and the CDU's victory in the Saxony-Anhalt state election gave some momentum to his campaign, his ratings again plummeted when footage showed him joking with his aides during a speech by federal president Steinmeier to the victims of the catastrophic floods in July (Figure 4).⁵⁴ Laschet's state government was also criticized for its provision of disaster relief and the extent to which infrastructural deficiencies had failed to prevent the loss of lives and damage caused by the flood.⁵⁵ Moreover, 62 percent of voters connected the flood to climate change, which further increased the issue's salience.⁵⁶ Since Annalena Baerbock, as the chancellor candidate for the Greens, was also under pressure for misleading and erroneous statements in her vita,⁵⁷ these developments set the stage for the unexpected resurgence of the SPD. For two years, polls had indicated that the Greens would be the Christian Democrats' main rival for the chancellorship. Part of the latter's strategy was to attack Baerbock and the Greens for their

alleged lack of economic expertise and executive experience.⁵⁸ This strategy, however, was unlikely to work against the SPD led by finance minister and deputy chancellor Olaf Scholz, especially since the Social Democrats seemed to be avoiding the frictions of the past between a moderate lead candidate and their more left-wing party base.⁵⁹

Figure 4: "... is suitable as a chancellor." (share of "yes" answers per candidate)

[FIGURE 4 HERE]

Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: Politbarometer, 26 March to 17 September 2021.

Laschet's failed internal coalition-building is important to understand why the Christian Democrats were unable to adjust their campaign to the new situation. On the party's right, Laschet caused irritations when advocating more spending bypassing Germany's balanced budget provision, and *Mittelstand* faction leader Linnemann indicated that Laschet should henceforth coordinate his statements on economic and financial issues with them.⁶⁰ Laschet also probably missed an opportunity when the *WerteUnion* ("Union of Values") elected their new chairman. The (national-)conservative faction had attracted less than one percent of the CDU's and CSU's overall membership since emerging in protest to Merkel's policies but had become a notable voice in internal party politics, often captivating significant media coverage. The faction made again headlines when several liberal Christian Democrats failed to secure the nomination against rising conservatives, stimulating fears that the CDU might face a factional surge similar to that of the Tea Party within the GOP.⁶¹ When a local CDU branch in Thuringia nominated Hans-Georg Maaßen, former President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution who had caused controversy for promoting far-right positions, as district candidate, it highlighted how far parts of the CDU had moved to the right.⁶² However, when the *WerteUnion* elected a new leadership with connections to the AfD and the far right, numerous people, including high-ranking members, resigned in protest.⁶³

Laschet, and later Merz, responded to the events by condemning the *WerteUnion*.⁶⁴ The conservative newspaper *Die Welt* criticized Laschet for not distinguishing between the faction's conservative and far-right members and thus missing an opportunity to reach out to its more moderate parts.⁶⁵

On the left, Laschet did not close ranks with Söder, who had adopted the role of the Christian Democrats' frontrunner on the issue of climate change. Disagreements emerged between them on the timeline and scale of reforms.⁶⁶ By demanding more ambitious steps, such as bringing forward the coal phaseout and demanding mandatory solar panels for new buildings, Söder painted the picture of Laschet as a laggard on the issue.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding that Söder's own record in Bavaria was less impressive than his rhetoric suggested, he seemed more dynamic and ambitious than Laschet.⁶⁸ It did not help Laschet that several public statements suggested that he lacked expertise in this field.⁶⁹ The CSU blamed Laschet for the Christian Democrats' poor standing in the polls,⁷⁰ fueling speculations over whether Söder would replace Laschet as chancellor candidate.⁷¹

Given these internal divisions, it is not surprising that the Christian Democrats were the last among the three main contenders for the chancellorship to publish their manifesto. The manifesto's title ("Stability and Renewal", *Stabilität und Erneuerung*) spoke to the Christian Democrats' challenge to campaign as an incumbent party while formulating new ideas. Critics, however, observed that "stability" seemed to "outweigh" renewal, with the manifesto including few new ideas.⁷² While it promised a "decade of modernization",⁷³ pledges often remained vague, especially when it came to the Christian Democrats' ambition to reconcile economy and ecology.⁷⁴ The manifesto affirmed the goal to achieve greenhouse gas neutrality by 2045 and identified the European emissions trading scheme with uniform prices as the

main mechanism to achieve this goal but without specifying the envisioned price for the CO₂ certificates.⁷⁵ Similarly, while the manifesto emphasized technological progress as the driver of both climate protection and economic growth, it did not outline whether and how the emphasis on deregulation and cutting red tape would be sufficient to achieve Germany's envisioned renewable energy mix.⁷⁶ It also remained open how the emphasis on individual freedom and deregulation would be reconciled with the aspired social solidarity.⁷⁷

Almost more importantly, the manifesto attracted doubts regarding its financial viability. The manifesto promised that the revenues generated through the emission trade would be returned in full to the public by abolishing the surcharge included in Germany's Renewable Energy Sources Act.⁷⁸ However, without specifying how much the CO₂ certificates should cost, it was unclear how realistic this promise was. Similar doubts emerged when looking at the Christian Democrats' fiscal and economic plans. The manifesto rejected tax increases.⁷⁹ At the same time, it promised tax reductions for small and medium incomes, an increase in the earning threshold for mini-jobs, and presented the idea of a so-called "generation pension" (*Generationenrente*), whereby the state would make monthly contributions to the retirement provisions of each newly born child.⁸⁰ As the manifesto also endorsed Germany's balanced budget provision and did not mention any plans for addressing rising inflation,⁸¹ left- and right-leaning newspapers questioned the manifesto's feasibility.⁸² Overall, the manifesto was a far cry from the signals of renewal the Christian Democrats had sent with their programs in the early Merkel years.⁸³

The more concrete parts of the manifesto seemed to mostly accommodate the Merz wing by proposing to cap the tax rate on businesses' profits at 25 percent, ease the corporate tax burden, support home ownership, and abolish the solidary surcharge ("*Soli*").⁸⁴ Critics pointed

out that the proposals would disproportionately benefit the wealthy,⁸⁵ while the manifesto remained vague on the steps and/or timeline to ease the burden on lower and medium incomes.⁸⁶ When Laschet tried to backpedal by saying that there would not be any tax cuts, he was criticized by the Social Democrats for abandoning his own manifesto and by the CSU, which insisted on tax cuts.⁸⁷ This only reinforced the impression of a diluted party profile.⁸⁸

“The team of desperation”

Facing poor public opinion, the pressure on Laschet to announce his team increased. Already in May, Horst Seehofer (CSU) remarked that citizens would certainly be interested in learning whom Laschet had in mind when he was promising gender parity in his future cabinet.⁸⁹ In June, Mike Mohring (member of the CDU’s leadership board) praised Laschet’s promise to involve people who stood for the Union’s different pillars but demanded further concrete steps.⁹⁰ In August, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* cited a member of the CDU leadership stating that “Laschet must quickly understand what we have been telling him for weeks: that it is now vital that a team is coming together.”⁹¹ Tobias Hans, CDU governor in Saarland, concurred by urging Laschet that “[w]e must finally show what the Union stands for and with whom we want to shape the future of the country alongside the chancellor candidate.”⁹²

However, Laschet waited until the end of August to announce further members of his team. The names he presented, together with a 15-points plan to address climate change, were mostly unknown to the wider public and certainly did not include the key players within the CDU and CSU.⁹³ This did not change in early September when Laschet announced a team that sought to cover all relevant policy fields. With the exception of Merz and (to a lesser extent) Dorothea Bär, who had been state minister for digitalization in the federal government, the remaining six names, like deputy leader Silvia Breher and Karin Prien, who was minister of

education in Schleswig-Holstein, neither carried much public recognition nor inspired much authority among Christian Democrats.⁹⁴

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called it, crushingly, the “team of desperation”.⁹⁵ It did not include a single member of the Merkel cabinet, the CSU leader, or Röttgen, as the candidate for a more progressive course in January’s leadership contest. Including Bär as the representative of the CSU suggested that either Laschet did not want to work with Söder or that Söder did not want to work with Laschet. Nominating Bär as the person to advance digitalization also attracted criticism since Bär, as state minister, had been at least partially responsible for the little progress the government had made in this field in the previous years.⁹⁶

With an increasingly isolated candidate, the Christian Democrats focused the last weeks of the campaign on attacking Scholz for his role in several fiscal scandals and for not explicitly ruling out a coalition with the socialist Left Party.⁹⁷ The talk about a potential Red-Red-Green coalition intended to mobilize voters on the right to push the Christian Democrats ahead of the SPD. Yet, with the Left Party falling close to and, on election day, below the five-percent threshold, this rhetoric lost traction. In the end, the Christian Democrats lost massively. According to Infratest dimap, CDU/CSU lost almost three million voters to the SPD and the Greens. This was almost twice as many voters as the Union lost to the FDP (- 1.3 million voters) and AfD (- 410,000) combined.⁹⁸ Laschet himself had become an electoral liability. A Forsa poll in mid-August suggested that a quarter of those who did not intend to vote CDU/CSU at that time would have done so if Söder had become the candidate. If only 50 percent of these people had ended up doing this, so Forsa’s calculation, the Christian Democrats would have received 33 percent.⁹⁹ While this seems to support the narrative that a Söder candidacy would have been more successful, it needs to be interpreted against the backdrop of the

development until that point. Laschet started the year with the reputation of being able to mediate between the party's different wings. It is this "politics of mediation"¹⁰⁰ that he failed to respect, thus violating an internal practice almost as old as the party itself.

Conclusion

It is too early to say whether the CDU has stopped being a *Kanzlerwahlverein*, but it certainly stopped acting like one in this campaign. Armin Laschet's election as party leader in January 2021 came with the hope that he would mediate between the CDU's internal wings. His own background and record as governor of North Rhine-Westphalia seemed to make him a promising choice to mediate between social-Catholics, liberals, and conservatives. However, the teamwork he promised never took shape. His aborted coalition building set the stage for the battle over the chancellor candidacy with the CSU, which exposed how deeply divided the Christian Democrats were at a time when Germany faced significant challenges as a result of the pandemic. Even after securing the nomination, the conflicts continued and resulted in a late release of the election manifesto. Programmatically, the notion of "economy and ecology" remained ill-defined. The manifesto was criticized for being overly vague and, in its attempt to please everybody, provoked criticism for lacking a solid financial basis. Where it was more concrete, the program seemed to unilaterally appeal to voters on the right, ignoring that in the elections in the last four years, the CDU often lost as much or even more voters to the Greens as to the AfD. Laschet's efforts to correct this resulted in contradictory policy statements and further internal turmoil. Despite his party's repeated pleas to announce his team, this only happened mere three weeks before the election and mostly incorporated the CDU's lower leadership level.

This lack of internal coalition building is unusual for a party that has often been noted for its internal integrative strength.¹⁰¹ Yet, parties that have been as long in government as Germany's Christian Democrats have often shown difficulties in maintaining internal cohesion.¹⁰² This was also true for the CDU at the end of the tenure of Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl. Both episodes were eventually followed by a return to internal coalition building during the reform process under Kohl and Biedenkopf in the 1970s and the renewal under Merkel in the early 2000s. The party would be well advised to return to the practice of internal coalition building if the CDU wants to avoid the fate of Christian Democratic parties elsewhere in Europe.

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- ¹⁵ Matthias Dilling, “Die CDU. Repräsentationsgarantien und -defizite einer Volkspartei,” in *Parteien und soziale Ungleichheit*, ed. Elmar Wiesendahl (Wiesbaden, 2017): 89-121, here 97.
- ¹⁶ Boris Herrmann and Robert Roßmann, “Die drei Neuen von der CDU,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 January 2021.
- ¹⁷ Statement by Elmar Brok. A video of the party congress is available via Phoenix’s and the CDU’s YouTube channel.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, “Laschet: Deutschland zu klimaneutralem Industrieland machen,” *Welt Online*, 12 June 2021; “Markus Söder: Ökologie und Ökonomie verbinden? Da muss die Union Marktführer sein,” *Welt Online*, 02 May 2021.
- ¹⁹ Philipp Kollenbroich, Armin Himmelrath, Lukas Eberle, Jörg Diehl, “Das Prinzip Laschet,” *Spiegel Plus*, 04 June 2021
- ²⁰ An informal circle bringing together Christian Democratic and Green MPs in the 1990s and early 2000s. Prominent CDU politicians, besides Laschet, attending these meetings included Hermann Gröhe and Norbert Röttgen. For the Greens, prominent participants included Cem Özdemir and Andrea Fischer. See Kristian Frigelj, “Geburtsort der schwarz-grünen ‘Pizza-Connection’.” *Welt Online*, 09 March 2010.
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- ²³ Reiner Burger, “Ein Partner, um eigene Schwächen auszugleichen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28 April 2021.
- ²⁴ Ricarda Breyton, Anette Dowideit and Jacques Schuster, “Krise der Union: Die Stunde der großen Verunsicherung,” *Welt Online*, 14 March 2021; “Laschet und Merz gemeinsam beim Parteitag der Südwest-CDU,” *Welt Online*, 02 May 2021.
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- ²⁶ Christian Parth, “Armin Laschet: Mit dem Rücken zur Wand,” *Zeit Online*, 30 March 2021.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ “Schäuble will Merz wählen,” *Welt Online*, 15 January 2021.
- ²⁹ By January 2021, Merz had lost his comfortable lead among CDU supporters (29 percent, -10 percent compared to November 2020). Laschet (25 percent, +10) and Röttgen (25 percent, +3) had closed in. 12 percent supported none of them/a different candidate (-3 percent). Infratest dimap, ARD-DeutschlandTREND, 01/2021.
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- ³² Miriam Hollstein, "Erste Namen: Mit diesem Team will Armin Laschet siegen." *WAZ.de*, 21 May 2021.
- ³³ Roman Deininger et al., "Träumt weiter: Die CDU war noch nie bekannt für Visionen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 March 2021; Veit Medick, "Merz wirft CDU-Spitze Führungsversagen vor," *Spiegel Online*, 19 March 2021.
- ³⁴ Kleinmann (note 6), 421-437; Clemens (note 11), 61-67.
- ³⁵ Anna Clauß et al., "Die Panik-Union," *Spiegel Online*, 07 March 2021; Florian Gathmann et al., "So will die Union den Maskenskandal loswerden," *Spiegel Online*, 09 March 2021; Breyton, Dowideit, and Schuster (note 24).
- ³⁶ Jens Thurau, "'Es war eine Wahl der Persönlichkeiten,'" *Deutsche Welle*, 14 March 2021.
- ³⁷ Against the backdrop of an increasing number of COVID cases and conflicts among the Christian Democrats and between the federal government and the state governors, the share of people (very) satisfied with the government's and states' handling of the pandemic decreased by 23 percent within a single month. Respondents particularly criticized the government's lack of consistency and clarity. *ARD-DeutschlandTREND* 04/2021, 3, 6.
- ³⁸ Daniel Brössler, "Lindner hält sich zurück," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 March 2021; Kevin Hagen, "Schock für den Neuen," *Spiegel Plus*, 15 March 2021.
- ³⁹ Petr Jerabeck and Eva Lell, "Söders Angriff und Laschets Konter: Was hinter dem Streit steckt," *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, 31 March 2021, available at <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/markus-soeder-und-armin-laschet-was-hinter-dem-streit-steckt,ST8sKc7>, accessed 02 March 2021.
- ⁴⁰ 79 percent of CDU/CSU supporters considered Söder a good chancellor candidate compared to only 29 percent for Laschet. *ARD-DeutschlandTREND*, Infratest dimap, 04/2021, 10. Melanie Amann et al., "Der oder ich," *Der Spiegel* (17 April 2021).
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- ⁴² Kleinmann (note 6), 434.
- ⁴³ Amann (note 41)
- ⁴⁴ "Nur vier Prozent halten Laschet für 'führungsstark,'" *Zeit Online*, 14 April 2021.
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- ⁴⁷ Amann et al. (note 48).
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- ⁵⁸ Stefan Kornelius et al., "Laschet eröffnet Wahlkampf mit Angriff auf die Grünen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 April 2021; "Erhebliche Zweifel, dass sie Kanzlerin kann" – Merz greift Baerbock scharf an," *Welt Online*, 22 April 2021; "CDU greift Baerbocks Wahlprogram an," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 05 May 2021.
- ⁵⁹ Uwe Jun, "Germany: Little Hope in Times of Crisis," in *Why the Left Loses*, eds. Rob Manwaring and Paul Kennedy (Policy: 2018): 103-122, here 108; William Paterson and James Sloam, "The SPD and the Debacle of the 2009 German Federal Election," *German Politics and Society* 28, no. 3 (2010): 65-81, here 67-71.
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- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 34, 35, 42, 104.
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- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 34, 38, 61, 71.
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- ⁸³ Clemens (note 7).
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- ⁸⁵ Alexander Hagelücken, "Union: Kaltes Herz," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 09 July 2021; Fried (note 74).
- ⁸⁶ CDU/CSU (note 77), 34, 71.
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⁹³ The team included Andreas Jung (deputy caucus leader), Thomas Heilmann (Berlin), and Wiebke Winter (leader of the CDU's youth movement in Bremen). "Laschet stellt sein Dreier-Team für den Klimaschutz vor," *Welt Online*, 30 August 2021.

⁹⁴ The full team also included Andreas Junge, Barabara Klepsch (minister for culture and the arts in Saxony), Peter Neumann (an expert on terrorism, who had already advised Laschet in his 2017 state campaign), and Joe Chialo (music manager and district candidate in Berlin). "Union stellt Team vor," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 04 September 2021.

⁹⁵ "CDU/CSU: Das Verzweiflungsteam," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 04 September 2021.

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⁹⁸ Available at <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/btw21/waehlerwanderung-bundestagswahl-103.html>, accessed 28 February 2022.

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¹⁰⁰ A term coined by Van Kersbergen to describe Christian democratic parties' approach to integrating and thus appealing to a variety of different interests. Kees Van Kersbergen, "The Distinctiveness of Christian Democracy," in *Christian Democracy in Europe*, ed. David Hanley (London, 1994): 31-47.

¹⁰¹ For example, Bösch (note 3), Turner (note 7), and Wiliarty (note 10).

¹⁰² Boucek (note 8).

Table 1: CDU and CSU results since the 2017 Bundestag election

| Year | Election | Result in % | Change in % | No. of CDU/CSU votes in prev. election ¹ | Vote shift from/to... ...Greens ...AfD | | CDU/CSU lost most votes to... |
|------|----------------------|-------------|-------------|---|--|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2017 | Lower Saxony | 33.6 | -2.4 | 1,287,549 | +23,000 | -45,000 | SPD |
| 2018 | Bavaria | 37.2 | -10.5 | 5,636,425 | -170,000 | -160,000 | Greens |
| | Hesse | 27.0 | -11.3 | 1,199,633 | -99,000 | -96,000 | Greens |
| 2019 | Bremen | 26.7 | +4.3 | 261,929 ² | +2,000 ³ | -1,000 ³ | AfD |
| | Europe | 28.9 | -6.4 | 10,380,101 | -1,110,000 ⁴ | -230,000 ⁴ | Non-voters |
| | Saxony | 32.1 | -7.3 | 645,414 | -4,000 | -81,000 | AfD |
| | Brandenburg | 15.6 | -7.4 | 226,835 | -7,000 | -28,000 | AfD |
| | Thuringia | 21.7 | -11.8 | 315,104 | -5,000 | -36,000 | AfD |
| 2020 | Hamburg | 11.2 | -4.7 | 561,377 ² | -9,000 ⁵ | -1,000 ⁵ | Greens |
| 2021 | Baden-Württemberg | 24.1 | -2.9 | 1,447,462 | -70,000 | +70,000 | Non-voters |
| | Rhineland-Palatinate | 27.7 | -4.1 | 677,507 | -13,000 | +4,000 | Non-voters |
| | Saxony-Anhalt | 37.1 | +7.4 | 334,139 | +1,000 | +16,000 | n/a |

Note: Election results from *Bundeswahlleiter (2021) Ergebnisse früherer Landtagswahlen. Wiesbaden*; *Bundeswahlleiter (2019) Ergebnis Europawahl 2019*. I have used the party-list vote. Data on vote shifts from Infratest dimap via tagesschau.de/wahl.

¹ The data refers to CDU and CSU together in nationwide elections, to the CSU for the 2018 Bavarian election, and to the CDU in all other elections.

² Each voter has five votes.

³ Vote shift compared to 2017 *Bundestag* election. Estimate based on the number of voters rather than the number of votes. Voters are linked with the party that they gave all or most of their five votes to.

⁴ Vote shift compared to the 2017 *Bundestag* election.

⁵ Estimate based on the number of voters rather than the number of votes. Voters are linked with the party that they gave all or most of their five votes to.

Figure 1

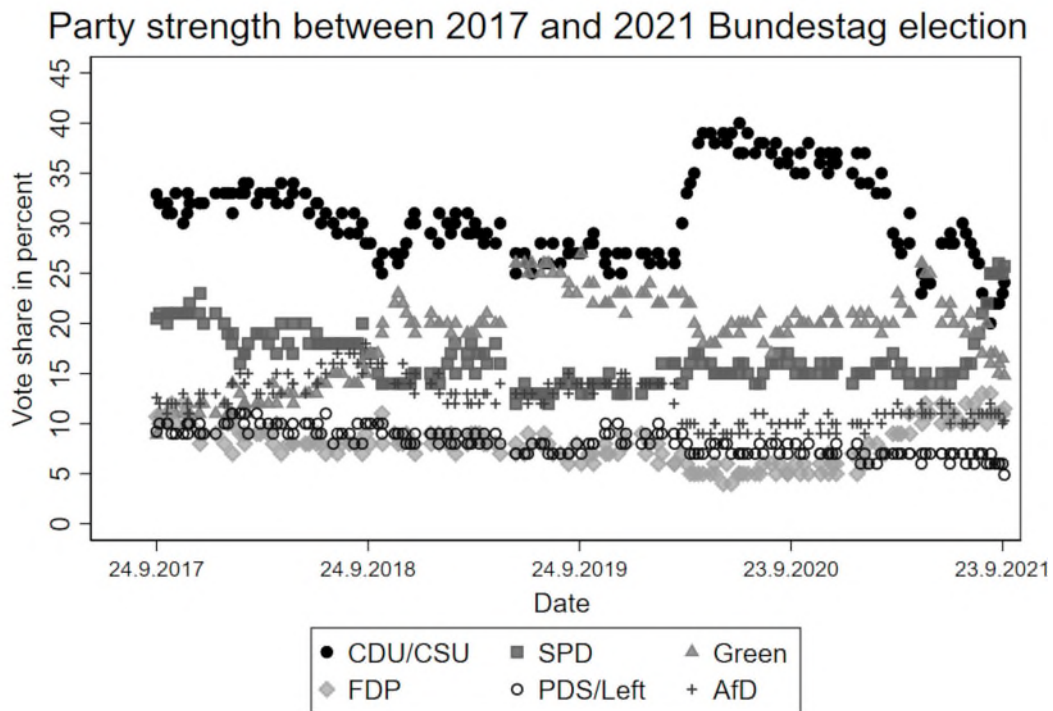


Figure 2

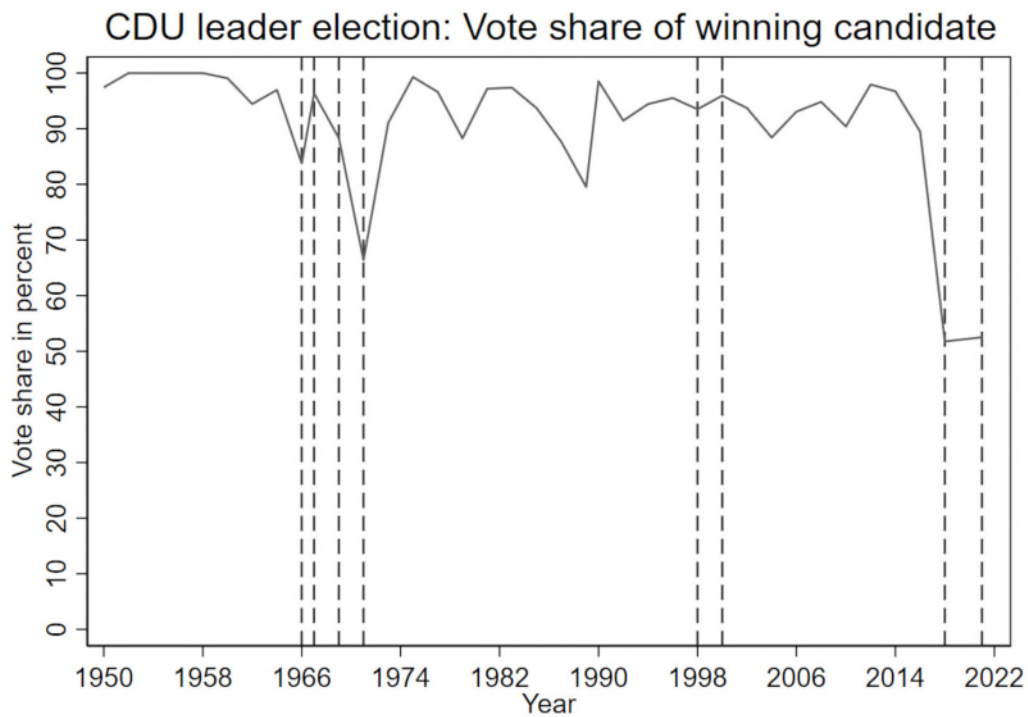


Figure 3

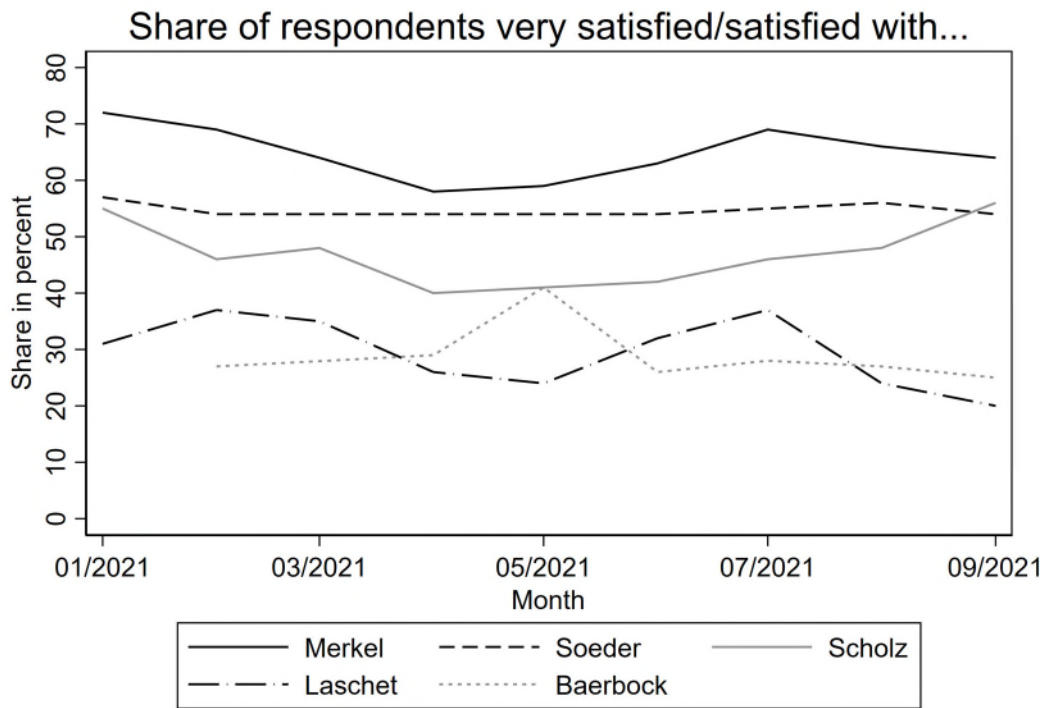


Figure 4

