



September 2021

German Elections 2021

Bertil Wenger¹

It is less than 2 weeks to go until election day on 26 September, and the circumstances of the campaign for the 20th German Bundestag are unprecedented: After 16 years in office, Chancellor Angela Merkel will not run again, meaning that for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany the incumbent head of government will not be the front runner of its party. After decades of dominance of CDU/CSU - or SPD - led governments, be it with the support of smaller parties or in so-called “grand coalitions” between the major parties, it looks highly unlikely that either of the latter will be able to form a government with just one partner. Instead, a variety of 3-party coalitions seem almost inevitable. 3 parties - CDU/CSU, SPD and the Greens - have nominated candidates for the top job (“Kanzlerkandidat”) with public opinion associating more flaws than positive attributes to either of them. Last but not least, the CDU is struggling not only to keep the Chancellery and to come first past the post, but also to retain its character as the last remaining people’s party in Germany. Early absentee voting may rise to as high as 50%, creating many decisive election days. All aspects of this election remain highly volatile, and every one of them has the potential to be a “game changer”.

Party Landscape

In July 2021, there seemed to be no doubt that the CDU would be the winner of the September election and that it would be impossible to form a government without it. Leading with as much as 29% in the polls, the only question preoccupying onlookers was whether the CDU could form a coalition with the Greens or would require another partner to secure a parliamentary majority. Since then, the CDU has suffered immensely in the polls, with most analysts blaming a number of perfectible public appearances of its front runner, a questionable campaign strategy and the overall lack of popularity of CDU party leader Armin Laschet. As a consequence, pollsters see the CDU stripped of almost a third of its voters, namely those who in the past have voted for the popular Merkel without having a strong

—
¹ Bertil Wenger - Director, Regional Programme Australia and the Pacific, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

affinity to the CDU as a party.

As of recently, the question debated is no longer whether the CDU will lead a government but rather whether she will be part of it at all. The Social Democrats, having been in a slump in the polls for most of this election year and the preceding period, have managed to gradually squeeze not only past the Greens but also the CDU to take first place. This success is primarily associated with the combination of poor performances of the other two candidates - allegedly ill-fated Armin Laschet and the inexperienced Annalena Baerbock from the Greens - and the calm, steady and statesman-like appearance of their front runner, Olaf Scholz, currently finance minister in the outgoing coalition between CDU, its Bavarian sister party CSU and the SPD.

The SPD rose to about 25% by early September, the CDU is trailing by some percentage points and the Greens - after briefly leading the polling race in April at 25% - now sit below 20% in the third place. The other contenders are the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the right-wing Alternative fuer Deutschland at around 11%, as well as "Die Linke" ("The Left"), the left-wing successor of the former East-German Socialist Unity Party. Given the fact that all of these parties will refrain from forming a coalition with the right-wing Alternative fuer Deutschland, the following coalitions - habitually named after the country that bears these flag colours, namely CDU black, SPD red, "Die Linke" dark red, FDP yellow, and the Greens - would be possible:

"Jamaica", Black, Green, Yellow: Should the CDU come first, many analysts see this coalition as the most likely one because both the SPD and the CDU are eager to end their 8-year "forced marriage" and because the SPD has already signalled to not be available as a junior partner for the CDU. If the CDU were to keep the Chancellery, it is further expected that the CDU will hold on to the Ministry of Economy, leaving the - possibly enlarged - Ministry of Environment and the - always highly esteemed - Foreign Office to the Greens and the Finance Ministry to FDP leader Christian Lindner who has shown some interest in this portfolio. While such a coalition would likely be supported by a solid majority in the Bundestag, the programmatic and ideological differences would be stark, especially in regards to European and financial policy. Noteworthy: After the last election in 2017, FDP leader Lindner had his party leave "Jamaica" coalition talks.

The "Traffic-Light": Should the SPD be able to achieve its current polling position in the election, this could be a likely coalition. Apart from a comfortable majority in Parliament, pleasing the majority of the German public which does not wish "Die Linke" to be involved in any government, could be an incentive to aim for it. Here, too, ideological and programmatic differences next to the outright mutual dislike between FDP supporters and the two left-leaning parties do not provide an ideal basis for a trustworthy cooperation throughout an entire legislative period.

"Red-Red-Green": This coalition would bring together the three left-of-centre parties, meaning a resilient basis could be forged for topics such as finance/taxes, asylum/refugees and social/family policies. Troubled waters would be the important transatlantic relations, and the relations with Russia and NATO. In addition, there is the German public's aforementioned aversion against "Die Linke", the close-to communist-successor of the SED party responsible for countless killings of people at the inner-German border, rising to power in a national government.

“Germany”: “Schwarz-Rot-Gold” (Black-Red-Gold/Yellow) would mean a centre-alliance with a comfortable majority in the Bundestag which at the same time would come close to a continuation of the worn-out “grand coalition” between CDU and SPD supported by the FDP. While there would be sufficient public support, this would mean a likely continuation of old frontlines on a number of reform issues such as Europe, the economy and the environment.

“Kenya”: Yet again a “grand coalition” with the Greens as supporting partner, this would be an alternative if the SPD were to come first and the CDU agreed to be the junior partner, which is rather unlikely. While there would be sufficient Bundestag support and common ground could be found on a number of issues such as the environment, just as in the event of a “Germany”-coalition, a “Kenya” coalition would unlikely result in an ambitious fresh start tackling the most imminent problems.

The Candidates

After the 16-year tenure of Angela Merkel - which earned her the nickname “Mutti” (Mummy) - steering Germany rather successfully through European and global crises, the 2021 election has evolved into a personality battle circling around the question who would be best suited to have Merkel’s hard-boiled composure and presidential beyond-party-politics approach to be Germany’s “CEO” in troublesome and unsteady times.

Annalena Baerbock: 40 years of age, Baerbock, who studied law in Hamburg and London, worked as an assistant to an MEP in Brussels before returning to Germany and winning a seat in the German Bundestag. She defeated her co-party Chairman Robert Habeck in the quest for party leadership. Two months ago, a series of incidents with “bended truths” shook her campaign massively, making it impossible for her to fully recover. This included a published personal CV including false or at least “beefed-up” facts about her credentials, a recently published book which was intended as her personal political agenda and which proved to be copy-pasted to a noticeable extent. However, her greatest weakness is that she has never served in any executive position. She is not a good public speaker, either, causing people to chuckle when she mixes up words and creates funny new ones. All of this makes Germans doubt if they should put the fate of the country in the hands of someone as inexperienced as Baerbock.

Olaf Scholz: 63, a lawyer by profession turned career politician, former governing mayor (premier) of the federal (city-) state of Hamburg and current finance minister, looks like the man of the hour. After being turned down in late 2019 as chairperson of the SPD, leaving the leadership to the left-leaning Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans, thanks to him promising broader acceptance with the voter, the moderate Scholz was this time elected as “Kanzlerkandidat”. Unemotional in appearance, he has managed to turn this negative attribute into an advantage: the more the other candidates appeared unfit for the job for varying reasons, the more the “Scholzomat” (the Scholz-Automat) with his calm approach resembles the experienced and safe hand Angela Merkel had been for so many years. Has he become the real “Merkel-clone” everybody desires to embody?

Armin Laschet: CDU chairperson. The son of a coalminer, 60 years of age, with a background in law and journalism, has spent most of his life in politics and held mandates both in the German Bundestag and the European Parliament. His career shifted towards regional politics in his home-state of North-Rhine-Westphalia, where he was a two-time minister (for families and European affairs). In 2017, he eventually managed to win the elections, securing the premiership, an office which he holds to date. Albeit his extensive experience and the fact that he successfully governs the largest federal German state in a coalition with the liberal FDP with a frail majority of just one mandate, this has not led to a sound public perception of him being well suited for the chancellorship. A left-leaning German media has contributed its fair share to this image. One incident has harmed Laschet's public image, when he, the "Landesvater" ("father" of his state), was caught on camera inappropriately chuckling with others while the German Federal President was speaking on one of the devastated sites of a recent massive flood, claiming close to a hundred lives and thousands of destroyed homes and existences. Laschet's efforts to be a Merkel-like candidate have proved to be beneficial and harmful at the same time. On the one hand, Germans, in particular those who have not known any other Chancellor, like Merkel's unvain, presidential style maintaining a certain distance to her own party. On the other hand, especially traditional CDU supporters are blaming Merkel of having blurred the CDU's programmatic stance, supposedly rendering the party increasingly undistinguishable from other parties. Many think a fresh start with a new style is needed and that Laschet, the most Merkel-like candidate, does not stand for that.

But in order to even better understand Laschet's ailing popularity in this election campaign, one must turn to the inner state of his party, the CDU, its relation to its Bavarian sister party, the CSU, and the CDU's campaign strategy. After Merkel stepped down as chairperson of the CDU in late 2018, the CDU underwent a strenuous process of selecting her successor. Minister for Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer was the new hope of the CDU after she narrowly defeated by a delegates' vote at a party congress in 2018 the former and now on the rise again CDU bigwig Friedrich Merz. The latter was once pushed aside by Merkel in her quest for a fully fledged party and parliamentary group leadership and remains the old and new hope of liberal-conservative party members. However, in early 2020, Kramp-Karrenbauer called it quits after realising she did not have the full authority over the CDU's regional organisations with regard to questions concerning the party's relationship with the right-wing Alternative fuer Deutschland. A massively corona-delayed digital party conference held in early 2021 saw yet again a narrow victory by Armin Laschet over Friedrich Merz, showing that the CDU is basically split in two camps. However, unofficial counts carried out before the delegates' vote had shown strong sympathy of the CDU basis, its members, for Friedrich Merz. Disappointment rose among them and it would get yet another boost: Having secured the leadership of the CDU, Laschet now needed to secure the "Kanzlerkandidatur", the candidature for chancellorship, traditionally negotiated between the leaders of the "Union" parties, CDU and CSU. For months, this question was on the minds of the capitals' journalists who were told that it would be solved in a good, sisterly spirit, choosing the one candidate with the best chances of winning the election. When the time had come in the spring of 2021, CSU patriarch Markus Soeder could present some impressive and verifiable arguments: he had 100% support from his own CSU - not so Laschet from his CDU -, he was the preferred candidate of the only joint decision making body of CDU and CSU, namely the parliamentary group in the Bundestag, he even enjoyed a majority among CDU voters and was leaving Laschet behind in personal popularity polls. Despite this, the CDU insisted on its candidate on overriding goals, forcing Soeder to withdraw. Next to a disappointed and aggravated CSU, this series of incidents caused a significant number of CDU members complaining that grassroots party democracy was not served this way.

Hopes that the CDU's members/supporters would soon forget about this did not come true: to date, the CDU's campaign postings in the social media are frequently commented with rejection of these events and disappointment, claiming that CSU leader Soeder would have been the better suited candidate.

Campaign Strategy

Despite the ugly fraternal war between Laschet and Soeder, the efficacious chuckling-blunder after the devastating floods and a rather limp campaign, the CDU and Laschet can still win this election in the last two weeks. But so far, the campaign did not focus enough on the right priorities, eg presenting "teams of competence", with often not so well-known politicians instead of portraying Laschet as a determined decision-maker in this highly personalised election. Focussing on Laschet's well-known ability to integrate varying positions may be helpful in coalition negotiations but not in regards to winning the election initially. In this race of 3 candidates perceived as rather uninspiring, sharpening Laschet's profile, being more aggressive and polarising positions will require significant attention as well as addressing hard topics such as the economy and security/migrants, in order to attract still undecided liberals and conservatives looking for clues as to which party they might vote for this time. Also, the CDU needs to learn quickly that the "Merkel System", having summoned up many voters under the CDU-umbrella which are not convinced CDU-followers, will only work with the trusted Angela Merkel as a glue. Polls indicate that these voters may have left the CDU already. Little time remains to revive the "core-nucleus" of the party, but it can be done. Laschet's speech at a CSU party conference on 10 September, a recent appearance in a TV-debate out of all three candidates and putting a focus on economy and security showed Laschet in a sharp and pointed mood, which are moves in the right direction.

Conclusion

A rather unusual campaign is going into its final stage. Since none of the candidates is a true favourite of the people, much will depend on their personal public appearance in the last days, convincing the traditionally big share of voters, who make up their mind in the last three days before election day. After 16 years of Merkel tenure in the Chancellery, the CDU must manage to both preserve her legacy and to be true to its core supporters by focussing on their topics. For the CDU, it may be necessary to realise that the strategic approach of a 35% party with Merkel must differ from that of a 25% party without Merkel. The FDP will likely be decisive when it comes to coalition negotiations. Times are volatile and the days of two-party coalitions are *for the time being* likely over.

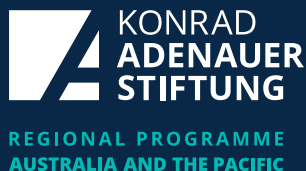
About the Author

Bertil Wenger

Bertil Wenger is director of the regional office of the KAS for Australia, New Zealand and the Southern Pacific as of 1 September 2021. Expected to move to Canberra in October 2021, he is a lawyer by profession with a more than 20-year experience in policy consulting in the German Bundestag, public affairs companies and the CDU Headquarters in Berlin, where he was director of international relations from 2011-2021. His fields of experience include international relations and party developments, as well as foreign and security policy. He is married with two children.

About the Periscope Series

'Periscope' is the Occasional Analysis Paper/Brief series of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Regional Programme Australia and the Pacific. Just like the real-world sighting instrument, Periscope is meant as a lens to broaden our insights - taking in views from different angles. This way, it seeks to bring together perspectives from Germany, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific region to augment our understanding of contemporary issues and help address the pressing problems of our time. The Periscope Series covers topics from the area of foreign and security policy, cybersecurity, terrorism/counter-terrorism, energy policy, rule of law, socio-economic matters and development policy. It comprises both **longer Analysis Papers** – in the form of single-author (and co-authored) contributions or edited volumes with multiple authors - and **shorter Analysis Briefs**.



Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Australia) Ltd
Regional Programme Australia and the Pacific
www.kas.de/australia
periscopekasaaustralia.com.au



This analysis is published under a Creative Commons licence:
"Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0),
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/legalcode>

This publication of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung is solely intended for information purposes. It may not be used by political parties or by election campaigners or supporters for the purpose of election advertising.

Periscope – Special Edition Analysis Brief Series (September 2021).
ISSN: 2652-7332 (Online)