

Germany's Year of Elections: Has the Pandemic Scuppered the Green Rise?

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Before the pandemic hit, Greens in Germany were on an upward trajectory, reaching historic highs in terms of membership and electoral success. Key to their emergence as the preeminent progressive force in the country was the party's capacity to set out a forward-looking vision that resonated with society. But as Germany enters a *Superwahljahr* – with regional elections throughout the year and federal elections in September – where do the Greens currently stand? As Merkel readies to leave office and the pandemic continues on, are the Greens still carrying the political momentum?

When I last wrote about the German Greens in late 2019, the party was on a high, riding a Green wave. It had achieved its best-ever result at the European elections and in a string of regional and local elections. Overtaking the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens had become the leaders of the progressive camp and were challenging the Conservative CDU/CSU in the opinion polls. In June 2019, they were leading the pack, polling at 27 per cent, followed by the CDU at 25 per cent.

Fortune favoured the Greens but then, as they often do, events took over. Covid-19 put an abrupt end to the hype. Climate change no longer dominated the headlines and the Fridays for Future movement deserted the streets, while the politics of permanent emergency put the spotlight on the governing parties.

Now, in 2021, Germany has entered a *Superwahljahr* – a super election year, comprising five state elections and a federal election in September. The upcoming period will be a defining moment for Germany, ushering in a post-Merkel era (the Chancellor has led Germany since 2005). The new government will face enormous challenges: the hegemonic US-China conflict, climate change, new technologies, populism, and the post-pandemic economy. It will chart the path for Germany, and with it the European Union, for these “roaring twenties” of the 21st century.

Pandemic realignment

Crises inevitably concentrate public attention on the executive and so the pandemic naturally rearranged the political pecking order. Chancellor Merkel and the CDU/CSU emerged stronger with poll numbers rising from the mid-20 per cent range to 39 per cent during the pandemic. Even the struggling coalition partner SPD enjoyed a boost, moving from an all-time low of 12 per cent to 17 per cent. Meanwhile, the Greens dropped 9 points from 26 to 17 per cent. In summer 2020, some commentators speculated that the Social Democrats were set to surpass the Greens and reclaim the leadership mantle among the progressive camp. But it was not to be.

This reconfiguration was not simply down to the crisis benefitting governing parties. Of course, the CDU/CSU and SPD received the most media attention during the pandemic, while opposition parties struggled to respond and largely supported the government. But other factors were also at play. While some parties used this historic occasion to their advantage, the pandemic exposed the weaknesses of others.

A steady hand in a crisis

Before Covid-19 hit Germany, the CDU was in a deep quagmire; it was internally conflicted and openly divided.

The leadership challenge between the Merkel wing, represented by Armin Laschet, the Minister-President of North-Rhine Westphalia, and the more conservative wing, represented by Friedrich Merz, was putting pressure on the party. In addition, the CDU faced difficulties distancing itself from charges of co-operating with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in East Germany. In February 2020, after regional government elections in Thuringia resulted in a stalemate, the CDU joined the AfD in voting for Thomas Kemmerich, leader of the Thuringian Free Democratic Party (FDP) which barely entered the regional parliament with five per cent, for Minister-President. This open co-operation between the CDU and the far right damaged the CDU's national image significantly. A similar situation resurfaced in Saxony-Anhalt later in 2020, where the CDU joined the far right in opposing the rise in public broadcasting fees.

During the pandemic, the leadership question took a backseat. Markus Söder, Conservative Minister President of Bavaria, appealed for less division, reminding the factions that “divided parties don't win votes.” More importantly, however, the CDU was able to play to different voter interests, just as the Greens had been doing.

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As explained previously, the Greens have started to pursue a politics that bridge divides (economy vs. environment, savings vs. investment, refugees welcome vs. Fortress Europe) and solve contradictions. While the Greens have sought to bring people together in their approach, the CDU has taken a different route: using different politicians to speak to different voters. For example, while Laschet strongly supports opening up and giving people more freedom, Söder has pursued a very restrictive, cautious pro-lockdown policy. This allows the CDU/CSU to speak to both sides of the debate.

The CDU/CSU has also used the crisis to embark on major policy shifts. Most notably, to abandon its fiscal conservatism entirely. Of course, a crisis requires a fiscal response but the Conservatives went further, investing in crucial research areas such as quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and other key technologies. This influx of public investment matches longstanding Green demands.

It seems the Conservatives have understood that they are increasingly seen as behind the times. They have picked up on the widespread desire for change and recognised that the Greens are widely considered to represent it. Söder considers the Greens to be the greatest political threat to his party and is now running to catch up. Conservative online campaigning now increasingly features gay couples, people of colour, and renewable energy to try and catch the wave. Whether this new image is believable is another question altogether.

A blow for the Greens

The Greens, on the other hand, had a difficult time. Under the leadership of Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock, two charismatic and fresh political figures, the Greens have become marketing specialists. In his latest book *Die Grüne Macht*, Ulrich Schulte argues that “no party has mastered the rules of modern media staging as

perfectly as the Greens. Every detail is carefully choreographed.” However, in a crisis, people are interested in action, not photo opportunities. Habeck posting pictures on Instagram of him cutting his own hair and reading Albert Camus’s *The Plague* was a bridge too far. Habeck has also shown that he is not gaffe-immune in recent years, strengthening the case for co-leader Annalena Baerbock, who likes to know the ins and outs of every political issue, to be named as the lead candidate in the upcoming federal election.

Simultaneously, the Greens faced increased pressure on their climate credentials as a range of Fridays for Futures activists started to argue that the Greens lack ambition. Moreover, a new political party – Die Klimaliste, the climate list – has been formed. Although prominent activists have distanced themselves from the list, this new force could nevertheless cost the Greens a few votes. Elsewhere, contradictions arising from the Greens’ positions have come to a head. In Hesse, the Greens, as the governing party in charge of the economy ministry, were responsible for implementing a federal decision to build a highway. Its construction, however, meant cutting down the 250-year-old Dannenröder forest, to which climate activists reacted by setting up camp in the forest. The dispute pitted climate activists against the Greens, who were legally required to implement the federal decision.

Like many other parties, the Greens initially struggled to respond to the pandemic. Bernd Ulrich, a well-known commentator from the German weekly *Die Zeit*, has argued that the Greens have shown the extent to which they have become part of the political establishment by rallying behind Merkel’s management of the crisis. By taking relatively radical measures, such as opening the coffers and increasing subsidies for electric vehicles, the government took the wind out of the Greens’ sails.

The road to the elections

The pandemic took the Greens down a peg but, by autumn 2020, they had found their stride again. They started to raise issues that the government had overlooked, such as the hardship experienced by freelancers and the plight of children in the pandemic. They organised a children’s summit, together with child psychologists, paediatricians, teachers, and social service workers.

The Greens also argued that the crisis must be used to tackle the even greater challenge of climate change. By insisting that a recovery from the pandemic cannot mean a return to business as usual, they kept their narrative for a better future alive. They also went beyond traditional Green topics, publishing a paper on combatting Islamic radicalism in Germany and improving internal security. They also celebrated some successes during the pandemic. In the local elections in Germany’s most populous state and Social Democrat heartland, North-Rhine Westphalia, they won numerous mayorships in sizable cities.

Now, the federal electoral situation seems to have stabilised. The Greens are back to polling at 20 per cent, the Conservatives are descending from their high 30s, while all other parties remain frozen in the polls. But a number of factors could still lead to surprises as the race heats up.

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The CDU/CSU might seem united in the pandemic, but the question is to what extent it will remain so. The CDU leadership election was incredibly close. Armin Laschet won with 53 per cent of the vote, while Friedrich Merz garnered 47 per cent. The question of who will be the Conservatives’ candidate for chancellor, Laschet or Söder, also remains unanswered. As soon as the Conservatives choose their candidate, they could very well lose their

Merkel bonus. It will be first time since the Second World War that an incumbent Chancellor is not standing for re-election.

The CDU has suffered historic defeats in the regional elections of Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz. While Greens saw very strong wins. This has the potential to bring the CDU into a downward spiral. Further factors could strengthen such a dynamic. The party is also increasingly tarnished by corruption as more cases of suspected graft and dubious business dealings come to light. CDU/CSU Bundestag members, such as Georg Nüßlein and Nikolas Löbel, used the pandemic to broker procurement deals for masks. For these services as middlemen, they received 660,000 and 250,000 euros respectively. While CDU politician Philip Amthor helped a US firm gain political appointments in exchange for shares in that company, CDU Bundestag members Axel Fischer and Karin Strenz allegedly received payments to lobby in the interests of the government of Azerbaijan. These cases significantly hurt the image of the Conservatives. Last but not least, the federal government is losing public support due to the rolling out of the vaccination campaign, which has been progressing at a snail's pace.

Some commentators, such as Wolfgang Münchau, have even argued that one of the winners could be the liberal FDP, which has argued for less restrictive management of the pandemic and a more rapid opening up.

The Greens, meanwhile, harbour a huge voter potential. According to a study by the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation, the Greens are the second political party of choice for many voters. A quarter of Conservative supporters, 30 per cent of left-wing Die Linke, and 39 per cent of Social Democrat voters name the Greens as their second preference. Many opinion polls indicate that voters would like to see a Black-Green government next.

Parties go on the offensive

The Greens are therefore the main competitor for most parties across the political spectrum. This has led parties to respond in two ways:

First, most political parties have now recognised that German society wants some change and are styling themselves as future-oriented new change-makers. The CDU/CSU has tried to give itself a makeover. The SPD has put forth a "Future Programme" as its election programme. The first slogan that greets visitors to their website is: "Future for you. Social. Digital. Climate-neutral." The programme is classically left-wing with calls for better social security, more taxes, but also contains green elements with proposals for more climate protection. If the party succeeds in combining a forward-looking and progressive stance with the credibility of its chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz, the current finance minister, it could endanger the Greens' second place in the polls. However, it would not be the first time such a rebranding has been tried. Die Linke has also attempted to make itself more dynamic, by electing two young women, Janine Wissler and Susanne Hennig-Wellsow as its leaders.

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The only political parties sticking to their profile are the FDP and the AfD. The FDP relaunched itself ahead of the 2017 election and is firmly in the grips of its party leader Christian Lindner, who has little interest in reshaping the party a second time. The AfD, on the other hand, have contradicted themselves throughout the pandemic and have steadily lost support.

A second approach on behalf of political opponents has been to step up pressure on, and criticism of, the Greens. A recent controversy over detached family houses is an apt example. A local council in Hamburg decided not to include any single detached houses in their building plans. The ensuing discussion saw Anton Hofreiter, co-chair of the Green Bundestag Group, explain that detached houses had a greater ecological footprint and take up land that could be used for more housing. This stance became framed as “Greens banning single family houses”. The Greens have no such plans and similar planning decisions are common throughout Germany and have been taken in the past by the Conservatives, but the episode shows what they can expect in the months ahead.

With more scrutiny and attacks in store, the Greens will have to be careful about how they formulate their programme and political demands. At the same time, they will have to try to continue to dominate the news cycle as they did prior to the pandemic and demonstrate that they are the only party genuinely driving progressive change.

Moving into unchartered territory

The major election issues will be the handling of the pandemic, the economy (where the CDU/CSU and FDP are considered particularly competent), and which political party symbolises a new dynamic force for progress. Climate change could come to the forefront again once the pandemic restrictions have eased and climate activists return to the streets, giving green issues more publicity. Foreign policy, despite its importance, will most likely not play any major role.

With three candidates – Conservative, Green, and Social Democrat – in the running for the chancellorship, the electoral race is still open and polls could begin to shift as Germany emerges out of lockdown. While the SPD has already announced its candidate, both the CDU/CSU and the Greens will announce their chancellor candidates after Easter.

For the first time in history, the German Greens have a realistic chance of being the big winners of a federal election, overtaking the SPD and entering government after nearly 16 years of opposition. A black-green coalition is currently most likely, but other constellations, such as black-red or a three-way coalition with the Liberals, cannot be ruled out.

Should the Greens join the new government, a new raft of challenges will present themselves. The Greens will have to show that they can deliver on their promise of change, even in coalition with conservative partners. They will have to show that they can enact change and not just talk about it in election programmes, op-eds, and on Instagram. They will be also confronted with tough decisions that might go against their core voter interests, in order to benefit society as a whole.

Much will depend on the new leadership. If Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck both join the government, who will take the reins of the party? Both Robert and Annalena are from the *Realo* – pragmatic centre – wing of the party. Will the more left-leaning *Fundi* wing argue that now is the time for two left-wing co-chairs? And if so, what would that mean for relations between the Greens in government, subject to the constraints of a coalition and policymaking for the good of society, and the party leadership, operating in a party context and doing politics to mobilise constituencies?

While these questions remain unanswered, it is clear that the Greens are in their strongest ever position going into this electoral race, and they are hungry to win.

This article was updated on March 15 to include the result of the Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland Palatinate elections



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