

Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck and the Limits of Co-Leadership

Article by Roderick Kefferpütz

August 17, 2022

Under Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, the German Greens grew into a formidable force in German politics. Their pragmatic leadership prioritised unity over ideological division, helping them make gains in regional elections and broaden their base. On the national stage, however, the limits of this power-sharing model began to show. Roderick Kefferpütz reflects on the success of their co-leadership but also what happened when it met the realities of political competition.

It is difficult to share power. Shared power often means diminished power; it's less effective. Nevertheless, it has become a defining feature of the German Green Party, enshrined in the party's constitution to advance gender equality and democratic representation, prevent an overly centralisation of power, and give different political factions representation in power structures. Of the two Green co-chairs, each usually represents one of the main political factions within the Greens – the so-called Realo, the more liberal-conservative pragmatic wing and the left wing, and at least one must be female.

Power duopolies can hurt, rather than help political parties

Such duopolistic power structures however have a bad reputation. Divided power within a party can lead to factional infighting. Party leaders may be tempted to cement their own internal power base (at the expense of the party), quarrelling over strategy, political positions, the allocation of resources, as well as media attention. Instead of helping the party, power duopolies often hurt it.

The German Greens have largely exemplified this. In 2007, the overall Green leadership consisted of two party co-chairs, two party group leaders in the Bundestag, and an influential former environment minister. This gang of five was infamously dubbed the "*Pentagram of Horror*", as each politician aimed to prevent the progress of the others. Cem Özdemir and Simone Peter, party co-chairs between 2014 and 2018, were known to dislike each other to the extent that they avoided communication as much as possible. Such constellations often lead to electoral defeat.

The power duo contributed to electoral successes in regional elections, achieving the best result ever recorded in the 2019 European Parliament election.

In fact, both times the Greens entered government in 1998 and 2002, they were run by strong political personalities, such as Joschka Fischer. Contrary to party tradition, Fischer was the only real lead party candidate in the 2002 federal election. After Fischer's departure from political life, the Greens returned to their classic leadership duopoly and didn't return to government until 2021. Given this chequered history of shared political power within the Green Party, Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock could have been prey to the traditional destructive pattern when they took over the reins in 2018. But they didn't.

On the contrary, they led the Greens to stunning new heights. The power duo contributed to electoral successes in regional elections, achieving the best result ever recorded in the 2019 European Parliament election. They pushed the party to the top of the polls at one point and despite setbacks during the election campaign, they carried the party into the federal government in 2021 after 16 years of being confined to the opposition benches. Today, both are successful ministers: Robert Habeck as vice chancellor and federal minister for economy and climate and Annalena Baerbock as foreign minister.

What led them to ride so high? Is there a winning formula for political power duopolies? And what setbacks did they face?

Our latest edition - Making Our Minds: Uncovering the Politics of Education - is out now.

It is available to read online & order straight to your door.

[READ & Order](#)

Elements of a successful power couple

Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck succeeded as a Green power couple because they shared a number of winning elements.

First, they set their personal aspirations aside for common ambition. Habeck and Baerbock realised that if they wanted to be successful and lead the Greens into government, they would need to rely on each other and work collaboratively. They consequently postponed choosing a lead party candidate for the election and instead focused on representing a united front. Internal strategy documents dating back to 2018 stressed that the constant infighting within the Green Party was putting voters off. As the Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder remarked, "*divided parties don't win votes*".

As such, they made efforts to come together and unite the party.

Coming together was also easier because Habeck and Baerbock came from the same political faction within the Green Party. For the first time, the German Greens elected two co-chairs, both from the "Realo" faction, known as the pragmatic wing. This brought several benefits.

Because they already shared broadly similar political views, they didn't have to get bogged down fighting each other over political positions. This allowed them to better unite the party by jointly reaching out to the left wing. Back when leadership was divided, any concession to the left or "realo" wing of the party was seen as one co-chair winning against the other.

This was not the case under the Habeck-Baerbock model. And in this context, they both made conscious efforts to reach out and transcend the traditional cleavage within the party.

Because they already shared broadly similar political views, they didn't have to get bogged down fighting each other over political positions.

Their unified political visions meant that they could pool their resources. They ended the duplication of office structures – with each party co-chair having their own office and their own political staff – and instead used the freed-up resources and office space to strengthen the intellectual capacity of the party, hiring a range of advisors and strengthening the policy capabilities of the leadership. This set-up was unique under Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock. It has already been undone under the new party leadership of Omid Nouripour and Ricarda Lang, who both come from separate political factions.

Third, they shared a vision and strategy for the Greens. They both wanted to increase the relevance of the Greens and their electoral potential. They made a distinct effort to broaden their base, addressing all of society and not just niche Green voters. Peter Unfried, a renowned journalist for the left-leaning newspaper *taz*, remarked how the German Greens have evolved from being a party for “minorities... to being a party for the big picture.”

Fourth, they complemented each other. Habeck had government experience as a minister in the Schleswig-Holstein state; Baerbock had international and legislative experience having worked in the European Parliament and previously been a German Bundestag member. Habeck graduated in Philosophy and tends to philosophise, using a range of dialectical devices to discuss political issues. Baerbock on the other hand likes to know the ins and outs of every political issue. They also spoke to different demographics and were able to overshadow each other's weaknesses. Annalena Baerbock, for example, was quickly able to make up for Robert Habeck's faux-pas of posting an Instagram picture of himself reading Albert Camus' *The Plague* in the middle of the corona crisis, by taking up the cause of children who suffered during Covid lockdowns and organising a children's summit.

Last but not least, both were extremely media savvy, without one necessarily outshining the other. In his book *Die Grüne Macht*, journalist Ulrich Schulte argues that “no party has mastered the rules of modern media staging as perfectly as the Greens. Every detail is carefully choreographed.”

These five factors – paused personal ambition for a common ambition, shared political views, a joint vision and strategy, complementary backgrounds and distinct media profiles – were essential elements that made the Baerbock-Habeck duopoly so successful.

There can be only one

But this winning formula broke down when it came to the ultimate political question: who shall be the lead candidate?

In power duos, there is always a lead character. For every Robin, there's a Batman. For every Watson, a Sherlock Holmes. The same holds true in politics. Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer in Germany or Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the UK, are prime examples. Each had their own distinct position and role to play, but one of them was in the lead.

Although Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck occupied the same position, they were able to transcend usual power games, finding a *modus operandi* where their personal ambitions merged into a co-dependent common ambition of a Green electoral victory. But they were victims of their own success. As the Greens climbed in the polls and surpassed the traditional parties, they had a realistic shot at the big prize: winning the German chancellery. They were now faced with the question of who their chancellor candidate should be. And here, there can only be one.

Political views started diverging as Annalena Baerbock took the lead in positioning the party.

The thread that held this duopoly together, started to unwind. They had to choose who was going to win the spotlight. After long disagreements, Annalena Baerbock won out. Some have argued she had done so because the Greens favoured a woman candidate. Their interdependence formally ended with that decision, and with it, the tremendous rise of the Greens started to subside.

The five elements listed above started to work against them. Personal ambition overthrew the common one. Political views started diverging as Annalena Baerbock took the lead in positioning the party. This was particularly striking when it came to Robert Habeck's press statement in summer 2021 arguing for weapons exports to Ukraine, which Baerbock asked him to rescind. Political differences between the left and pragmatic wings started to emerge. Robert Habeck didn't have a clear role in the election campaign and disappeared for several weeks, robbing the party of the ability to use his media appeal and engage wider voter demographics. In the meantime, the extreme media spotlight was put on Baerbock looking for every minute criticism available and with Habeck not present, there was no possibility to deflect or to step into the breach.

Although a party can thrive when led by a duopoly, turning it into a "monopoly" immediately threatens its success. Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock confirmed this. Under their shared leadership, the Greens surged to 28 per cent in the polls. Yet after their duopoly ended and they entered the one-person election campaign, the Greens finished the election with 14.8 per cent.

How could they have better managed this power transition? Would they have been better off putting the question of the "chancellor candidate" earlier on the table? Should they have outsourced the decision to the party base? Should they have attempted to transcend the question, looking for a different model of candidating in the election? Or could they have found another prominent role for whoever would not be the lead candidate?

Power duopolies can work, as Habeck and Baerbock illustrated. But as soon as personal ambition and ultimate positions of power must be decided, they easily start to come

undone.

This article was originally published by Institut Montaigne.



Roderick Kefferpütz is senior analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) and a freelance strategist and writer. Prior to that he worked for Germany's only Green-led regional government as deputy head of unit for policy and strategy in the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg. He was previously head of office for MEP Reinhard Bütikofer.

Published August 17, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/annalena-baerbock-and-robert-habeck-and-the-limits-of-co-leadership/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.