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Angela Merkel and the Unfulfilled Promise of Chancellor Democracy

LUDGER HELMS

Since she became Germany’s chancellor in 2005, Angela Merkel has repeatedly been described in the international media as the most powerful woman in the world. Such a characterization seems to put Merkel in company with US presidents, who are often described as the most powerful men on earth.

This assessment should not be taken at face value, in particular because it confuses two issues: a country’s political and economic weight, and the political room for maneuver that its officeholders enjoy. Both the United States and Germany are compound polities with numerous and exceptionally powerful checks and balances (or, in modern academic parlance, veto players), which can undermine attempts at vigorous and effective leadership from the top.

That said, regarding the institutional settings in which US presidents and German chancellors operate, a chancellor may be expected to dominate domestic affairs more than an American president can. This is mainly due to the fact that Germany’s parliamentary system, with its characteristic fusion of power between the executive branch and the majority of the legislative branch, usually provides chancellors with a stable majority in the Bundestag, the national parliament.

Political science has put forward a wealth of concepts for studying the performance of national chief executives. In the German context, the best-known and most influential notion has been that of “chancellor democracy.” This idea first emerged in 1950s journalism in reaction to the resolute political leadership of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and then was broadly adopted by academics for the study of leadership in postwar Germany.

Chancellor democracy, conceptualized rather expansively, has sometimes been understood to include elements such as a chancellor’s prominent position in foreign policy, or a strong polarization between the chancellor’s party and opposition parties. But competing notions of chancellor democracy all tend to center on the chancellor’s political ability to control his or her party and to direct the actions of the government, thereby shaping as well the wider political process and major decisions of public policy.

When it comes to Merkel’s chancellorship, a key question is whether her leadership performance—particularly during the Merkel II government, a Christian-liberal coalition that came to power in October 2009—can reasonably be described as a manifestation of chancellor democracy.

A WEDDING OF ELEPHANTS

Merkel’s chancellorship began in 2005 with the formation of a grand coalition comprised of her Christian Democrats (CDU), their smaller Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democrats (SPD). The CDU and the SPD are the country’s two largest parties—and are also traditional rivals.

Given the results of the 2005 Bundestag election, no majority could have been commanded either by a bourgeois coalition between the Christian Democrats and the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) or by another Social Democrat–Green coalition, as had governed between 1998 and 2005. Moreover, all options for three-party coalitions lacked political viability. A “wedding of elephants” thus represented the only way out of the structural crisis...
into which the election had thrown the German party system.

Grand coalitions, in terms of the leeway that they provide a chancellor, have long been considered, if not the worst-case scenario, then close. Whatever is gained in legislative leverage through broad parliamentary majorities has to be paid for in the executive branch, where the existence of two coalition partners of nearly equal strength tends to push political transaction costs to unusual heights. For Merkel, with the Social Democrats holding no less than eight out of fifteen total portfolios—including the powerful finance and foreign ministries—the shackles were particularly tight.

For many observers of Merkel's early chancellorship, the natural yardstick by which to measure her performance was not her immediate predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, but Kurt Georg Kiesinger, who from 1966 through 1969 led the Federal Republic's first grand coalition government at the national level.

This comparison proved a blessing for Merkel. When chancellors are ranked, Kiesinger is usually assigned a position comparable to that, among postwar British prime ministers, of Alec Douglas-Home, or among US postwar presidents, of Jimmy Carter. To some commentators of the late 1960s, that era had witnessed “the disappearance of the chancellor” in German constitutional practice.

Measured against such a standard, Merkel's first term as chancellor was a major success. Her attempts at providing genuine leadership from within the chancellory were modest for the most part, but even these contrasted favorably with the Kiesinger experience. Positive assessments of her performance owed much as well to her international activities (though here again, she enjoyed a considerably better set of opportunities at the international level than did Kiesinger).

In some ways Merkel also benefited from the legacy of her immediate predecessor. In the early days of her chancellorship, many Germans were willing to forgive even recurring signs of indecisiveness and hesitancy as a welcome departure from Schröder's flamboyant personality and his proactive leadership style.

Moreover, the grand coalition functioned with relative smoothness, and the Merkel I government amassed a handsome policy record, which included major initiatives such as a large-scale constitutional reform of the federal system and reform packages in welfare, pensions, and finance and tax policy.

**Leadership Malaise**

Surveys carried out during the run-up to the Bundestag election of September 2009 left no doubt that a majority of voters considered Merkel the natural candidate for chancellor. In a way, however, Merkel's spell over the nation broke as early as election night. The campaign had been marked by a personalization of the chancellor, and by her enormous popularity, but these failed to produce significant coattails for the Christian Democrats.

The Bundestag elections produced two losers—one big and one small. The big losers were the Social Democrats, who suffered their heaviest defeat ever in Bundestag elections (they tallied just 23 percent of the vote, down 11 percentage points and 6 million votes from 2005). The other losers were the Christian Democrats, who had to accept, with about 34 percent of the vote, their second-worst result since 1949.

The winners were the three smaller parties in the Bundestag: the liberal FDP, the Left Party, and the Greens. These parties not only achieved their largest-ever combined share of the vote, but also secured the best results in their individual histories (14.6 percent for the FDP, 11.9 percent for the Left, and 10.7 percent for the Greens).

However disappointing these results may have been for the Christian Democrats, they allowed the party to form a new coalition, this time with a preferred governing partner, the FDP. Merkel thus became the first postwar chancellor to lead two fundamentally different governing coalitions.

This development created a special opportunity for scholars of the chancellorship to weigh the relative importance of a leader's personality and leadership style against the political context in which the chancellor operates. More importantly, when the governing coalition was formed in October 2009 between the CDU/CSU and the FDP, expectations were raised among the German public that chancellor democracy might
be powerfully rejuvenated, with, at its head, “Merkel Unbound.”

Well into the second year of the Christian-liberal government, this vision looks like wishful thinking. Even allowing for the different setting in which Merkel’s second term has taken place, and the high expectations that greeted it, the post-2009 experience resembles leadership malaise more than the leadership performance that Merkel displayed in the grand coalition years.

Some recent developments at the international level would seem to disguise this fact. At various European Union summits since early 2010, Merkel has indeed seemed willing to demonstrate that she is Europe’s “Iron Lady,” not afraid of offending long-time allies and partners.

Germany’s somewhat sternly restrictive position on how to deal with nearly bankrupt Greece and later Ireland, and the more general question of how to stabilize the euro in the future, marked a radical change from the country’s checkbook diplomacy of previous decades. In particular, Merkel’s steadfast opposition to the idea of eurozone members’ issuing collective “eurobonds” in amounts up to 40 percent of the zone’s GDP provoked scathing accusations of “un-European behavior.” (The eurobond idea had been put forward by Jean-Claude Juncker, head of the Eurogroup, which helps sets economic policy in the euro zone.)

To a considerable extent, however, Merkel’s toughness at the European level simply reflected Germany’s resource crunch at home. A government austerity package, introduced in June 2010, envisioned deficit reduction of about 82 billion euros over four years, making it the most ambitious measure of its kind in the Federal Republic’s history.

The package was broadly criticized by the opposition, both inside and outside the Bundestag, for being “unbalanced” and “unsocial.” For the coalition itself, the decision to give budget consolidation priority over distributive measures proved political dynamite.

The Christian Democrats’ junior partner, the FDP, had based virtually its entire electoral campaign on a promise to introduce substantive tax cuts, even to the extent that its political opponents accused it of being a single-issue party. But the FDP’s bargaining position within the coalition was difficult, and was diminished by the portfolio distribution in the Merkel II cabinet: The CDU controlled both the chancellorship and the finance ministry. This left the Free Democrats with little scope for advancing their more extreme policy positions and led them increasingly to attack their coalition partner in public.

The tension between the Christian Democrats and the FDP has also manifested itself in a difficult relationship between the chancellor and her vice chancellor, Guido Westerwelle, who is also foreign minister and head of the FDP. Indeed, whereas many postwar governments have been unofficially named after the chancellor and his or her vice chancellor (such as the Schmidt-Genscher government of 1974 to 1982, or the Schröder-Fischer government of 1998 to 2005), this has not been the case since 2009.

**Personal problems**

But the estrangement at the top has more to do with Westerwelle than Merkel. Even before Westerwelle had found his feet in foreign policy, he hit the headlines with exceptionally aggressive comments regarding the recipients of social security benefits, whose attitude he equated with late Roman decadence. Additional gaffes disenchanted even long-standing FDP supporters. Westerwelle soon became the most unpopular foreign minister in the Federal Republic’s history, and has been identified by many as a major liability not only to the FDP but to the governing coalition.

Many of the bitterest public disputes within the government have involved not Merkel and other members of the CDU, but rather the key protagonists of the FDP and the CSU. These disputes have had as much to do with individuals’ lack of respect for one another as with the parties’ fundamentally different positions in key areas such as tax and health policy.

Tax policy and health care were destined to become part of a public argument about the government’s direction because of the notable vagueness and incompleteness of a coalition treaty signed on October 26, 2009. (Since the early 1980s, an established part of the government-building process at the national level has been the signing of coalition treaties, in which the governing program’s key projects are sketched out. Making such detailed stipulations, it is hoped, can forestall major disagreements between the coalition parties at a later stage.)

The Merkel government, however, has been troubled not only by such structural problems but also by unexpected events involving political personalities. The most spectacular of these was the
resignation of the federal president, Horst Köhler, in May 2010.

Köhler, who had remarked that Germany’s military could take a role in safeguarding the country’s trade routes, and as a result had been sharply attacked by the opposition and broad sections of the media, resigned, he said, because of a lack of respect for his office and himself. His resignation proved delicate for the chancellor, since Köhler had been Merkel’s choice for the position in 2004.

But what proved more damaging to Merkel and her government was the messy selection of Köhler’s successor in June 2010. The federal president is elected in the Federal Assembly, a body composed of the members of the Bundestag and an equal number of representatives chosen by the states. There, Merkel’s candidate—Christian Wulff, the former minister-president of Lower Saxony—was elected only on the third ballot.

Candidates have had to face three ballots on other occasions in the past, but given the clear-cut majority that the governing parties enjoyed in the 2010 Federal Assembly, it was clear that many members of the majority had withheld their support for Wulff on the first and second ballots. It was also clear that they did so to strike at Merkel rather than Wulff—though many in the bourgeois camp felt sympathy for the opposition’s main candidate, Joachim Gauck, a former pastor from eastern Germany.

**Unexpected blessing**

On the basis of the time she has headed the Christian-liberal Coalition so far, one might feel tempted to consider Merkel a “shackled princess.” However, some of the constraints she faces appear related to her limited personal leadership capacities, instead of to external restrictions.

The first six months of Merkel’s second term, when the government still enjoyed a majority in the Bundesrat (the powerful second chamber of parliament) were mostly squandered through an unwillingness to make unpopular policy decisions that might have endangered the reelection of the Christian-liberal coalition in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Making matters worse, the strategic calculation did not pay off: The CDU and FDP lost that election anyway. Also, taking into account the weakening of both the FDP and the CSU, as well as the vagueness of the CDU/CSU–FDP coalition treaty, specific opportunities presumably have been available for hands-on leadership by the chancellor—yet these have been barely exploited. In fact, Merkel appeared much more comfortable when leading a grand coalition than she does leading her “dream coalition” today.

This phenomenon is obviously not unique to Germany. It is familiar, for example, from recent chapters of presidential leadership in the United States. Many observers of President Bill Clinton felt that the change from unified government (with the Democratic Party controlling both houses of the Congress as well as the White House) to split-party government (following the Republicans’ 1994 takeover of the Congress) turned out to be a blessing rather than a curse for his presidency.

More recently, Christopher J. Bailey, a specialist on American politics at Keele University, has advanced the thesis that divided government generally carries important strategic advantages for a president, allowing him to act heroically without actually having to deliver. It will be fascinating to observe the extent to which this will hold true for Barack Obama’s presidency following his party’s recent loss of the House of Representatives.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limits of the American-German analogy. In Merkel’s case, the executive governs today under a more “natural” partisan arrangement after having presided over a “difficult” grand coalition. This is the opposite of the experience of Clinton and Obama, who found themselves having to deal more with the opposition after the presidents’ parties lost governing majorities in the Congress. The direction of the political shift in Germany raised expectations that worked to make the chancellor’s personal weaknesses appear greater than they may actually have been.

**Coordinator in chief**

Even when a chancellor enjoys favorable conditions, no guarantee of powerful leadership exists. This idea is not new. Wolfgang Jäger, a professor of political science at the University of Freiburg, argued more than two decades ago that chancellor democracy had irreversibly been supplanted by a new paradigm, which he called “coordination democracy.”

Jäger contended that the proliferation and institutionalization of powerful political players at different levels of the German political system, and a matured German political culture, had minimized the structural opportunities for the manifestations of powerful chancellor rule that had still been pos-
sible during the Adenauer years. Most subsequent works on the German chancellorship have likewise expressed major reservations about the paradigm of chancellor democracy, and have focused instead on the numerous restrictions surrounding the office.

But this has not remained the last word on the evolving dynamics of political leadership in Germany. In a more recent analysis, Thomas Poguntke, a political scientist at the University of Düsseldorf, has drawn on previous research that he conducted with a British colleague, Paul Webb, on the “presidentialization” of politics, and has detected a strong trend toward centralization of political power in the chancellor.

Prima facie, presidentialization in the German context seems to be just a revamped version of the chancellor-democracy thesis. A closer look, however, reveals at least one crucial difference between the two diagnoses: the role of parties in successful executive leadership.

The chancellor-democracy paradigm considers parties in general, and a close relationship between the chancellor and his or her party in particular, a sine qua non. The presidentialization paradigm, on the other hand, highlights the emancipation of political chief executives from their parties. Viewed from this perspective, presidentialized leaders govern past rather than through their parties.

Merkel has indeed occasionally sought to govern past her party, and successfully so, but in her case the expected power-boosting effects have remained rather limited. Her term as CDU party leader has witnessed an unprecedented exodus of CDU heavyweights who have stood down from party leadership positions and electoral offices at the state level for a variety of reasons—some personal, but mostly political. (In 2010, three CDU minister-presidents, Jürgen Rüttgers of North Rhine-Westphalia, Ole von Beust of Hamburg, and Roland Koch of Hesse, resigned from their offices, at least two of them without any immediate need to do so.)

This exodus has reduced the danger of a direct leadership challenge from within the party, but it has also to some extent bruised Merkel’s reputation as party leader. More important, when Merkel eventually tried to practice strong leadership within the CDU—as she did at a party conference in Karlsruhe in November 2010, delivering her most intoxicating speech as party leader in years—this threatened to undermine her claim to be “chancellor of all Germans,” and narrowed her party’s coalition options.

**IS THE PARTY OVER?**

More lasting changes in the German polity relate not to the chancellor’s political style, but to the shifting role of the parties and the silent weakening of the institutions of party government—instutions that had provided the backbone for any substantive model of chancellor democracy. Three developments in this regard are particularly worth noting.

First, the era of the major people’s parties (Volksparteien), which have been part and parcel of German postwar political history, seems to be drawing to a close. In the 2009 Bundestag election, combined electoral support for the CDU/CSU and the SPD fell to an all-time low of 56.8 percent of the vote, a figure that looks even worse if considered in this context: Turnout in 2009 registered less than 71 percent, also an all-time low.

Moreover, the significant loss of support that the CDU/CSU experienced in public opinion polls over the course of 2010 has barely benefited the Social Democrats, the largest opposition party. The FDP, meanwhile, by early 2011 had lost almost two-thirds of the support it enjoyed in the Bundestag elections. And the Left Party remains frozen at about 10 percent.

It may be the Greens who will emerge from the recent turbulence as the winner; they have registered support of 20 percent in recent opinion polls over the course of 2010 has barely benefited the Social Democrats, the largest opposition party. The FDP, meanwhile, by early 2011 had lost almost two-thirds of the support it enjoyed in the Bundestag elections. And the Left Party remains frozen at about 10 percent.

Second, the German public has displayed a growing preference for charismatic, unpolitical figures from outside the party-defined political arena. This development stirs up memories of a problematic period in German history, the Weimar
Republic (1919–1933), when political parties were widely viewed as disturbing rather than assisting in the organization of the political process.

For instance, Merkel's defense minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg—while he admittedly is a representative of the CSU—enjoys exceptional favor with the German public seemingly because of his charisma and a carefully cultivated aloofness from the party-political game. Although the CSU has struggled in recent opinion polls, zu Guttenberg has established himself as by far the country's most popular politician (his support far exceeds that of Merkel).

Another example is the enormous popularity of the aforementioned Gauck, the 2010 presidential candidate of the SPD and the Greens. Gauck's more than respectable performance in the presidential voting was seen by many as a triumph of democracy, and his close defeat at the hands of Wulff has prompted suggestions that the Federal Assembly be abolished and that the federal president be directly elected instead.

These developments in German politics point to a third element of structural change, and arguably the most important: a growing skepticism regarding the institutions of representative democracy, and dramatically increased interest in unconventional forms of political participation. Among the most serious political upheavals of 2010 were mass demonstrations in Stuttgart, the state capital of Baden-Württemberg, against the state government and federal railway corporation's plans to demolish the city's central station and replace it with a new underground infrastructure (a project that has become known as Stuttgart 21).

Protests against the project, work on which began in February 2010, involved not just the "usual suspects" but also thousands of people from bourgeois quarters who previously would have seemed unlikely to engage in such actions. Protests continued even after a lengthy mediation process, which was concluded in December 2010.

The Stuttgart protests were by no means an isolated phenomenon. The antinuclear protest movement has experienced a notable and noisy comeback, mainly because of the Merkel government's decision to extend the life spans of Germany's 17 nuclear power plants. Protesters have also objected to transport of reprocessed nuclear waste from France to a depository in Gorleben, a small town in the northern state of Lower Saxony. At a major protest in Gorleben in November 2010, about 20,000 police were needed to protect a shipment and disperse crowds.

Even putting aside the particular reasons for public protests, the recent past has witnessed a growing interest in forms of political participation that reach beyond the established electoral regime. According to a survey published in December 2010 by Politbarometer, only 24 percent of German citizens want decisions on major projects such as Stuttgart 21 to be made by parliament, whereas 72 percent would prefer a referendum.

**A Good Hard Think**

Many of the challenges outlined above are likely to persist well beyond Merkel's chancellorship. Together, they are set to redefine the parameters of leadership in a country whose recent political past has been very closely tied to the well-being and prosperity of the major parties and the institutions of representative government. In essence, chancellor democracy has been nothing more than a particular form of party government, and party government is itself at risk.

The tasks facing future governments will include reflecting more carefully on the nature of politics and policy making, and finding possible avenues of improvement. Those who defend the idea of representative government, and who seek to preserve the German materialization thereof, will have to take seriously proposals for radical reform, such as the introduction of new instruments of direct democracy.

The political class's willingness and ability to conduct an open dialogue about making the German polity a more perfect democratic regime will be seen by many citizens as crucial indicators of how much responsiveness, responsibility, and democratic legitimacy are offered by the country's political system.