CHAPTER 4

The Selection of Party Leaders in Germany

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INTRODUCTION

German parties are in the process of overhauling their ideas of membership participation and intra-party democracy. The electorally most successful parties since 1949, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), introduced open competition between several candidates that took place in 2018 and 2019, respectively. Both parties thus met the demands for more intra-party participation. In December 2018, for the first time since 1971, the CDU conference delegates were able to choose between different candidates for the leader’s job. In autumn 2019, for the first time since 1993, all SPD members could cast their vote for their favoured candidate in a contest between possible party leaders.

However, it is not only the CDU and SPD that are responding to demands for more participatory rights for members (Detterbeck 2018). In recent times, we have seen contests between different candidates for...
the position of party leader or leading election candidates in other parties, too. How can this new development be explained? Who nominates the different candidates, formally and informally? What does this mean for intra-party democracy? The answers to these questions are highly relevant, because “party leaders in Germany are important political figures who preside over complex, multi-layered organisations” (Detterbeck and Rohlfing 2015: 77). Parties are still the most important and, at least informally, the most powerful organisations in the German political system (Korte et al. 2018). Parties run elections, organise parliaments and recruit government personnel. Within the parties, leaders exercise considerable influence and, in some cases, accumulate power.

In the next section, we describe the eligibility requirements, the steering agents, the process management and the formal selectorate of Germany’s right-wing populist party, Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), the Greens and the left-wing party Die Linke, in order to give some insights on several different selection processes and their different dynamics. They all stem from the fact that the parliamentary wing of the party has virtually no say in dictating the rules of intra-party selection of party leaders. However, we selected the SPD and the CDU—the largest German parties, in membership as well as in electoral terms—as in-depth case studies, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the steering agents, process management and change within these dimensions over the years. Describing the formal selectorate is an easy task, because of the strict regulations in the German Political Parties Act, explained below. Regarding the eligibility requirements, party membership usually fulfils these, with the exception of specific requirements declared by the party executive committees in special situations.

The Formal Aspects of Party Leadership Selection

This chapter explores the selection of party leaders in Germany both formally and empirically, aiming to compare the official story with the real story (Bille 2001: 369) of party leader selection.

The German Political Parties Act (Parteiengesetz) was passed in 1967. Although not the first party law “in the world nor even in Europe”, it became a model for party laws in other countries (Casal-Bértola et al. 2012: 4). The important role of political parties in Germany does not originate solely from the act; political parties are also anchored in the German constitution. Article 21 of the constitution states that parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people. Further, it
sets out rules on party bans and public financing. It leaves the remaining regulations of organisational structure, as well as further regulations of party financing, to the Parties Act (Article 21 (5) GG).

The act declares that parties must be organised in such a way that their members can play an adequate part in political opinion formation within them (PartG § 7 (1); von Alemann 1972). The party congress is a party’s highest institution (PartG § 9 (1)). It elects—among other organs and positions—the party chair and the executive committee (PartG § 9 (4)). As a rule, it consists of party delegates or, in rare exceptions, all party members. The chair of the party organisation is the party leader. He or she may or may not be the party’s leading election candidate and candidate for the job of chancellor (prime minister).

This regulation was challenged for the first time when the SPD decided in 1993 to open the leadership selection for all of its members (see below). The SPD members were asked, as part of a membership consultation, to vote between three possible candidates. The winner of the member consultation, Rudolf Scharping, was then ultimately elected as chair by the party congress. This kind of selection process was said to have revitalised the SPD’s membership and created the image of a participatory party (see Morlok and Streit 1996: 448). These mechanisms of direct democracy in party leader selection, from a juridical point of view, are not thought to contravene the Parties Act (Morlok and Streit 1996: 455) as long as they do not undermine the authority of the congress. Indeed, even if there are few legal concerns regarding leader selection by the party on the ground or all party members, there is no clear enumeration in the Act of the role that members should play in electing a chair. (Direct democracy is explicitly provided for only when a party dissolves or intends to merge with another party.)

**Party Leader Selection: The Smaller Parties**

This section focuses on the rules and statutes that regulate leadership selection from an intra-party point of view. As we saw, the Parties Act restricts the parties’ freedom of leadership selection modes, declaring the party conference the highest authority. Hence, selection is governed by a

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1 It should be noted that parties in Germany are obliged to consist of members in order to fulfil the requirements made by the Parties Act regarding intra-party democracy (Bukow and Poguntke 2013: 180).
simple principle, which gives conference delegates the exclusive power to choose a party leader. However, the parties are free to decide the voting rules and to set a term limit (Detterbeck and Rohlfing 2015: 82).

The AfD

The AfD is the youngest party discussed in this paper. Although only recently founded (in 2013), it underwent two fundamental changes, especially regarding party leadership. This will be further discussed in the following section, but it is important to know that the principle of double leadership is a prevailing element in the party—or even triple leadership, as the party statutes state that the party should have two or three leaders (AfD 2018: 15, § 13). This element may partly explain the programmatic course of the party.

The statutes of the AfD indirectly reflect its understanding of implementing consensus in the party’s executive committee, as well as direct democracy. They allow membership primaries to decide on questions of policies and personnel, but with a caveat: decisions that are restricted by the Parties Act to the party conference cannot be part of a membership primary (AfD 2018: 21, § 20 (1)). Other questions, such as the nomination of top candidates in federal elections, are open to membership consultation. This consultation should be treated as a recommendation instead of a membership vote, which is explicitly stated in Article § 20 (2) of the statutes (AfD 2018: 21).

The AfD started as an anti-establishment and EU-sceptical party. At its formation, the most prominent person in the party was Bernd Lucke, a professor of economics, who was presented in the media as a kind of informal party leader. The first leadership team also consisted of Konrad Adam and Frauke Petry. However, Lucke was soon pushed out of office by a nationalist and right-wing populist group that emerged predominantly in Eastern Germany, led by Petry. Whereas Lucke represented the economically liberal and culturally conservative wing of the party, Petry represented the nationalist, or völkisch, part of the AfD. When Lucke left the party in 2015, the economically liberal wing also quickly lost its power, with many of its members also leaving. Moreover, the growth of the authoritarian-populist wing was cultivated by the refugee crisis in 2015. Since then, the party has focused particularly on issues such as domestic security, border control, a very restrictive policy on asylum—and the institutionalisation of direct democracy (see Jakobs and Jun 2018: 272ff.).
In 2015, the new party chair, Petry, who had been supported by nearly two-thirds of party members (Häusler 2016: 241), was herself quickly drawn into power struggles. She was the “face of the party” (Pfähl-Traughber 2019: 6), but had a co-chairman, Jörg Meuthen, who initially represented the AfD’s economically liberal and culturally conservative wing. From 2015, he grew increasingly antagonistic towards Petry and was, by the middle of 2017, far more assimilated in the right wing of the party than she was (Häusler and Roeser 2017: 18). Losing her backing and seeing new rivals emerging, she soon realised that she had no longer enough support to be re-elected as chair in 2017. Like Petry before him, Meuthen turned out to be a “kingslayer”. He succeeded in toppling Petry and establishing himself as an even stronger leader.

The development of Meuthen’s policy preferences reflected the development of the AfD’s electorate, which, like the party overall, became more and more right-wing populist, “with extreme right relations” (Häusler 2019: 18). Nevertheless, the preference for authoritarian policies throughout the membership is, at first glance, not backed by a preference for an authoritarian understanding of leadership inside the party. On closer inspection, the process of leadership pre-selection and the nomination of leadership candidates seem to be characterised by sometimes crude and intense competition. Petry, for instance, not only resigned from being co-chair alongside Meuthen; she left the party altogether, and subsequently founded a new one. After her resignation, the AfD was led by Meuthen alone until a party congress in December 2017. At this congress, he was able to remain chair, but was only elected with 72 per cent of the delegates’ votes. Alexander Gauland, his co-chair, was elected with 68 per cent. In the final election, there were no other contenders.

Seen alone, this is not especially remarkable, but the run-up was dramatic. The executive committee nominated Georg Pazderski as co-chair. At the party congress, however, Doris von Sayn-Wittgenstein launched a rebellion without any prior notice. She was a relatively new member, representing the nationalist wing (“Der Flügel”), while Pazderski could be characterised as a more moderate national conservative. The latter reflected the more pragmatic wing of the party and was a balance to Meuthen. In addition, coming from Berlin, he could—at least partly—represent the East German part of the party; both Meuthen

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2 Indeed, Bergmann (2017: 13) argues that the majority of AfD voters see themselves as standing at the political centre regarding their policy preferences.
and von Sayn-Wittgenstein originate from West Germany. With a double leadership of Sayn-Wittgenstein and Meuthen, the leadership would have been dominated by the western part of the party, whereas the party is especially strong in the east.

However, this was not the crucial point. Sayn-Wittgenstein was able to gain not only attention, but also massive support, for proclaiming right-wing populist policies. As Gauland, one of the founders of the party and chair of its parliamentary group, put it, she was able to “appeal to the heart of the party, and it did not matter where she stands or where she comes from” (Zeit Online 2017a): As we will see in relation to the Green party and Die Linke, German parties traditionally try to balance their ideological wings and also other features of their memberships. This can mean quotas in the representation of genders in executive organs even rules about where in the country politicians come from. In the AfD, many party delegates threw such principles overboard. They were instead driven by a desire to foster the extreme forces of the party as strongly as possible.

In the end, however, neither Pazderski nor Sayn-Wittgenstein was able to obtain the necessary majority, and both backed down. As a consequence, Gauland saw himself as the only candidate who could bridge the widening gap between the different party wings, and he declared his candidacy. Despite his age—already 76 years old—he was elected co-chair, representing the party with Meuthen. With his quick push for votes as party chairman, he demonstrated his power inside the party as well as his prominent position—and that there seems to be no clear steering agent inside the party.

The interesting story about the AfD is that its different leadership choices are a reflection or mirror image of its short history—a history of radicalisation. However, the battle between both wings continues: Sayn-Wittgenstein has been excluded from the party but refused to give up her position as regional party leader in Schleswig-Holstein.

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3 For a more detailed account of the party convention in Hannover in 2017, see Zeit Online (2017b).
The Greens

The German Green party, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, was the result of a merger of two parties in 1993. Die Grünen was founded officially in Karlsruhe in 1980 with the intention of giving social movements a parliamentary voice. In contrast, Bündnis 90 was a merger of citizens’ initiatives in former East Germany that fought for citizens’ participation rights. Common to the two parties is the highly idealised idea of intra-party democracy. Over time, the party underwent certain adaptation processes that lead to a professionalisation of its organisation, but the element of primary elections has been maintained as a constant over the years (Probst 2017: 214). Hereafter in this chapter, we simply refer to the Greens.

The Greens’ statute states that every political question can be a part of a primary election. Each member is eligible to vote (Die Grünen 2018: 2, § 25 (1)). In accordance with the Parties Act, the congress, or Bundesversammlung, is the central organ of the party and elects the executive organs and leaders. The name Bundesversammlung reflects the ideals of intra-party democracy as the congress is open to each member (Switek 2015: 135). This openness is also reflected by the dynamics of the congress, at which delegates do not solely act as an instrument of acclamation. On several occasions, they have overruled even those political ideas presented as crucial by the leadership (Switek 2015: 137). In addition, there is no single party leader but rather two, at least one of whom must be a woman.

The Greens’ quota system is also noteworthy. In each organ on the federal level, women must be at least as well represented as men (Die Grünen 2018: 9; § 11 (4)). At state level, party units are encouraged to adopt the same provision. In addition, the Greens used to require a sharp separation between a party office and a public mandate. Individuals were prohibited from holding both. With the decision of a primary in 2003, this strict separation was loosened (Decker 2016: 258), but not fully repealed.

As in its election campaigns, the Greens nowadays seem to hold their ideal of intra-party democracy high. Both the leadership and the top candidates for general elections are currently part of a selection process that was initiated in 2012 and sought to involve the participation of the whole membership. Because three well-known Greens wanted to be the top candidate in 2013, and none of them backed down during the period of “pre-selection” (Träger 2015: 273), the party decided to choose through a primary election. In order to demonstrate the openness of the
whole procedure, the Greens accepted the candidacy of every member who wanted to be one. Eventually, 15 eligible contenders emerged, but only four of them—Jürgen Trittin, Renate Künast and Claudia Roth, the most prominent ones, plus Katrin Göring-Eckardt, co-chair of the Green parliamentary group—were known at the federal level (Träger 2015: 273).

The most compelling aspect of the process was that Roth lost the primary by a clear margin, but was re-elected as party chair a week later by its congress delegates (Träger 2015: 274). This highlights three mechanisms in the German Greens. First, the vote of the party on the ground for the top candidate in a general election does not determine the outcome of a vote held by the party delegates (Träger 2015: 274). Second, the Greens, as a self-declared primary-friendly party, are organisationally stressed by using direct internal democracy to choose its leading election candidates, while using representative democracy to select its leaders. Third, intra-party democracy counteracts the Greens’ complex quota system. In the course of the party’s history, its two original tendencies, the so-called Fundis and the Realos (see Zeuner 1985), both had to be reflected in the party leadership. In addition, one of two party chairs had to be a woman. Each member thus has two votes, one for a male candidate, one for the female.

Although the Greens seem to like primary elections, especially in choosing their leading candidates before elections, it does not appear that the process of selecting the party leadership will be opened up. On the contrary, the current leadership team, Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, are both Realos. In electing them (of the three candidates, Anja Piel was a Fundi), congress delegates broke with the fundamental principle of representing both party wings. This reflects a new pragmatism, perhaps partly due to high approval rates in opinion polls in the recent past (effective August 2019).

**Die Linke**

Germany’s socialist party, Die Linke, is the result of a fusion in 2007. The Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor to the former communist party of the German Democratic Republic, merged with the WASG, a party that was explicitly founded in opposition to the social policy (“Agenda 2010”) of the Schröder government in the early 2000s. Recurring problems in the party have included the involvement of people with
Die Linke offers broad membership participation. Consequently, direct participation of all members is possible on policy questions and in choosing intra-party office holders. This is explicitly integrated into the party’s statues (Die Linke 2018: 9, § 8 (1)). This paragraph also states that a membership vote must be considered as equal to a decision made by the party convention—which contradicts the Parties Act. For this reason, Die Linke introduced a restriction in the paragraph that rules a membership decision as consultative if it conflicts with the act (Die Linke 2018: 9; § 8 (1)). Moreover, in 2012, the party obtained an expert opinion on whether a primary could be a legal instrument to decide on its chair. The conclusion was that a primary—even a consultative one—could not be used (Morlok 2012: 19).

To understand leadership selection in die Linke, it is necessary to gain an insight into the party’s complex system of quotas. The dual leadership has to represent east and west, men and women and left and right. As a by-product of its evolution from a merger of several parties, die Linke developed a system of quotas and regulations that severely limits the power of any potential steering agents.

Because of its past, the party suffers especially from a cleavage between East Germany and West Germany. Moreover, overlapping the internal divide between east and west is that between left and right. This cleavage is reflected in discussions between party leaders—not only in the selection process, but in the pre-selection process too (Oppelland and Träger 2014: 158). This fundamental ideological divide in the party—a culture of mistrust between the party wings and factions, as Oppelland and Träger (2014: 161) call it—cannot be overcome by primaries alone. On the contrary, primaries to select the party leader might actually highlight the gap between the different groups of the party, and might override the unofficial and more or less unspoken quota system. The current leadership reflects the party’s highly complex selection process, which also helps to explain Die Linke’s high share of women among its MPs (Spier 2017: 204).

Before the 2012 party congress, Oskar Lafontaine openly challenged Dietmar Bartsch for the position of the male part of the dual leadership team (Die Linke has the same joint leadership system as the Greens). He had expected Bartsch to withdraw his candidacy; but he did not. In contrast, Bartsch sought and gained support not only from party elites
but from the important party membership in the east. Meanwhile, the West German party faction decided to back Lafontaine (Oppelland and Träger 2014: 158ff.).

In the event, neither Bartsch nor Lafontaine was selected. Instead, in choosing Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, the congress finally chose a well-known more leftist female candidate from East Germany and a fairly unknown, more rightist male candidate from West Germany. In their own struggle for power, many well-known politicians, such as Lafontaine or Gregor Gysi, dropped out of the leadership competition because the gaps in the party were far too wide for one of them to be chosen as leader. Indeed, it might be considered remarkable that, although Riexinger and Kipping were not elected with an overwhelming majority in 2012 (Fried 2012), they were still at the helm by the start of 2020. Nevertheless, they had to share power with the leaders of the parliamentary group—a more leftist woman from the West, Sahra Wagenknecht, and a more pragmatic man from the East, Dietmar Bartsch.

**Party Leader Selection: The SPD**

The first in-depth case study of this chapter focuses on the leadership selection processes in the SPD. The last two years were especially remarkable because of rapid leadership changes and a certain power vacuum, plus a—seemingly—inclusive leadership selection process.

The SPD originally represented the industrial workers and social democratic solidarity (Jun 2017: 469), but had to change its political course during the 1950s and 1960s. It created an image of being a progressive force for reform in the 1970s, but, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the party suffered from a latent conflict between modernisers and leftists. Like most of the other parties analysed in this chapter, the SPD’s

4 Although Kipping preferred to remain vice-chair of the party, she was respected throughout the party for overcoming ideological differences and seeking consensus (Zeit Online 2012a); with a delegate vote of 67.1 per cent, she was able to gather two-thirds of the party delegates behind her. Riexinger had not wanted to be chairman of the party either. Indeed, Kipping had wanted to build a double leadership structure with another female politician, Katharina Schwabedissen (Zeit Online 2012b). The latter, however, dropped out of the race because she did not want to get involved in the fight between the party wings (Neue Westfälische 2012). Indeed, Riexinger only narrowly beat Bartsch, 53.5 per cent to 45.2 per cent, “reflecting the fierce debate in advance of the convention” (Detterbeck and Rohlffing 2015: 86).
statutes do not allow for the membership to vote for the chair. There
is scope for membership consultations and decisions, but only in accor-
dance with the Parties Act (SPD 2017: 21, § 13 (2)). The designation
by membership vote of a leading candidate for federal elections is thus
explicitly mentioned in the statutes (SPD 2017: 21, § 13 (1)).

From Gabriel to Schulz, 2017

To describe the real story of SPD party leader selection, it is important
to look back to 1993. This year is not only remarkable because the SPD
employed primaries to decide over the party’s leading candidate in federal
elections (Leif 2009: 226), but also because it actually held a primary to
select the party leader. Still, the idea of introducing party primaries to
select personnel in higher functions was not entirely new to the SPD. It
had been part of discussions during party conventions in 1970 and 1982
(Ding 2015: 127).

In 1993, Björn Engholm decided to step down as chair, which came
quite as a surprise for the party.5 His decision not only left the SPD
with a power vacuum, but also with the need to decide on a new leader.
In this window of opportunity, the idea of deciding on the party chair
via membership decision—or rather, in accordance with the Parties Act,
a consultation—was broadly accepted. Three contenders declared their
candidacy. Two were from the left: Gerhard Schröder (who was consid-
ered left-wing at the time) and Heidemarie Wieczorek Zeul. Only one,
Rudolf Scharping, was from the party’s right; and, as a consequence,
he won a relative majority of the membership ballot. According to the
Parties Act, it was the delegates to the party congress who formally chose
Scharping as new party leader, based on the results of the membership
consultation.

However, this style of membership consultation did not become a
regular process of leadership selection in the SPD in the following years.
Indeed, it was seen by party researchers as an exception and a less
than ideal solution (Wiesendahl 2006: 157). With Sigmar Gabriel as a
comparatively long-term party leader (2009–2017), a hierarchical style of
leadership became increasingly prevalent. In addition to this hierarchical
style, Gabriel often acted brusquely, alienating not only some members

5 Or rather, the circumstances came as a surprise: Engholm was part of an election
campaign scandal in Schleswig-Holstein.
but his party colleagues too. He tended to ignore the preferences of the party on the ground, even on fairly significant policies, such as the law on data retention (Decker 2016: 163). Journalists called him a “part-time autocrat” (Kister 2018).

As a consequence of this leadership style, he increasingly became the sole decider over the fate and well-being of the party—and, consequently, over his successor. Indeed, and interestingly, the role of steering agent in the SPD came increasingly to be assumed by outgoing party leaders.

Gabriel’s sudden downfall in 2017 became a prologue to the rather unusual leadership selection process that followed. While commentators and party members were asking themselves whether Gabriel, in addition to being party chair, would also stand as its leading candidate in the federal election, he suddenly stepped away from both roles. In a statement to the party journal, he claimed that the SPD needed someone who represented the party in an authentic way (Gabriel 2017)—and put Martin Schulz forward as leading candidate in the coming federal elections. In addition, Gabriel argued that the leading candidate and the party leader should be one person. He thus clearly acted as the party’s steering agent, strongly favouring the rise of Schulz, a former president of the European Parliament, who had a vast knowledge of procedures and policies in Europe but who lacked competence in domestic politics. Even he was surprised by Gabriel’s sudden decision. Not only was this decision unexpected; it also did not fit in with the party’s timetable, scheduled by Gabriel himself. As his—presumably—last act of demonstrating power, Gabriel left the party as arbitrarily and autonomously as he had led it in the years before (Gathmann 2017).

The whole process of actively handing over a party office that ought to be decided by the party delegates was, frankly, astonishing. Yet the party did not seem to care—perhaps, in part, because it was unhappy with Gabriel, or because it wanted to display unity. Because of his sudden decision, no rival candidates had time to emerge as rivals to Schulz, not least because of the approaching federal election. In any case, Schulz was extremely popular throughout the SPD’s congress delegates and members. He thus accomplished something that had never happened before in the history of the federal republic: at the party congress, 605 out of 605 delegates voted for him as new party leader (and leading candidate). With such a degree of approval, the party seemed to be unified and revitalised. Schulz’s appointment triggered a so-called “hype”, with
support for the SPD rising in opinion polls and membership figures growing significantly (Hilmer and Gagné 2018: 374; Grunden et al. 2017: 99ff.).

**From Schulz to Nahles, 2017–2018**

Sadly for the SPD, that was not the only record that the party set in 2017. In the election, it suffered a historic loss—partly, indeed, because Schulz was not able to develop a coherent and suitable manifesto in such a short time. As a consequence, his standing in the party quickly eroded. Nor did his post-election behaviour enhance his position. His initial promise not to form a coalition with the CDU/CSU was quickly set aside. Instead, he put himself forward to serve as minister of foreign affairs in the forthcoming renewed grand coalition. Voters, party members and, especially, his own regional association did not appreciate this about-turn at all. In addition, the SPD parliamentary group seemed to be constantly one step ahead of Schulz. Indeed, it was rumoured that the leader of the parliamentary group, Andrea Nahles, wanted to be party leader too.

In light of the rapidly declining approval ratings in the opinion polls, Schulz decided to step down as party chair—and proposed Nahles as his successor. In exactly the same way as Gabriel had done, Schulz, the outgoing leader, put himself in the position of the steering agent to decide over his successor. He managed this less adroitly than his own predecessor had done, however. Schulz left a toxic legacy: the party struggled with the lowest poll ratings in its history, and the formation of a government was characterised by somewhat erratic party decision-making.

In addition, the leader’s job was far from uncontested. Schulz’s plan to propose a successor, and to expect the party just to nod him or her through, ignored the very different ideas among Social Democrats about their party’s direction. To “release some pressure”, the SPD’s executive committee decided to appoint Nahles as provisional leader until a special congress could decide on a new chair. Yet even that decision prompted revolt in some quarters. Simone Lange, the mayor of Flensburg (90,000 inhabitants) and barely known even within her party, declared her candidacy—as she put it, to give the party a choice (*Spiegel Online* 2018). An eligibility requirement was that at least three local party groups had to nominate her. But Lange was easily able to achieve this.
In the end, at the special congress, Nahles won the leadership election with only 66.35 per cent of the vote, which reflected her lack of popularity. When Gabriel had assumed the role of the steering agent, he had become an unpopular party leader; but he had paved the way for a popular successor, Schulz. When Schulz tried the same trick, however, he managed only to sponsor a successor, Nahles, who was almost as unpopular as he was. This was obviously not a happy combination for the SPD.

From Nahles to Walter-Borjans and Esken, 2019

Nahles, too, did not last long as leader. Her short stint ended after the European elections in 2019, in which the SPD suffered another historic loss. Because she left very abruptly and without any kind of warning, she was not able to play the role as steering agent as her immediate predecessors had done. Observers felt that she was anyway too tired of office to initiate a leadership selection process. Malu Dreyer, Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel and Manuela Schwesig, the three vice-chairs, acted then as interim leaders. On 24 June, they proclaimed a new mode of leadership selection. It was to involve all party members, repeating the procedure of 1993. This time, though, the party lowered the bar for candidates to be part of a consultation process. Each candidate or candidate team—and the party’s executive committee favoured a team, comprising a male and a female candidate—needed the backing of at least five sub-regional districts or one state branch of the party. Eight teams and one single candidate met that requirement and were presented to the members, who voted during October 2019. Two teams and the single candidate dropped out during the process, leaving six teams for members to choose between.

Each one of the teams was allowed to present itself during regional conferences, which can be compared to caucuses in American elections. Remarkably, only one member of all the teams could be considered prominent or even moderately famous: Olaf Scholz, the minister of finance. He and his co-candidate, Klara Geywitz, won the first election round, but only by a narrow margin. According to the rules, they had to face the runners-up in a final ballot. This run-off was considered a contest between the party wings, too: Scholz and Geywitz supported the SPD’s continued membership of the grand coalition, while the opposing team, Norbert Walter-Borjans and Saskia Esken, gave the impression of being much more doubtful about it. In sum, the two teams represented,
respectively, the rather “right-wing”, pragmatic part of the party and its moderate left wing. In a run-off vote, Esken and Walter-Borjans got 53.1 per cent of the membership’s vote; Scholz and Geywitz won only 45.3 per cent.

At the party congress, in December 2019, delegates decided not only on the winning team, but also, according to Walter-Borjans, on the Social Democrats’ direction. They followed the vote of the party membership, and chose Esken and Walter-Borjans as new party leaders. Still, the delegates afterwards also tried to unite the party. They voted for Geywitz as one of the vice-chairs and avoided openly questioning the coalition.

**Party Leader Selection: The CDU**

The CDU does not have any strict formal requirements for the selection of the party leader, aside from the familiar one that he or she is elected at a party conference, plus that this must take place every second year. There is no temporal limit to the period of office, so that a party leader can renew his or her position over a long period of time. The formal right of proposal is usually reserved to the delegates of the party, who can nominate themselves or others.

However, the CDU altered this rule during the 2018 selection process. According to rules agreed by the executive committee, eligible candidates had to be specially nominated. 6

Since 1973, the CDU has had only four leaders, of whom Helmut Kohl, Wolfgang Schäuble and Angela Merkel were each elected to office by acclamation at a party congress, without any rival candidate—in other words, a “coronation”. In 1971, Kohl had lost in a contested vote with the former parliamentary group leader of the Bundestag, Rainer Barzel. Two years later, however, Kohl became party chair, a position he held until 1998.

After Kohl’s resignation, Schäuble, his “hereditary prince”, was nominated unchallenged by the executive committee and was elected by the party congress (Walter et al. 2011: 92). It could be argued, then, that the executive committee was the steering agent in the process, or at least did not intervene; but it was clear to almost everyone in the party that

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6 The associations that could nominate candidates were: the executive executive (Federal Executive Committee), the national executive and respective executive committees of seven ancillary organisations (including youth and women) plus regional and local branches.
Schäuble should gain the position. Indeed, it was Helmut Kohl who recommended Schäuble as his successor and he can be seen as the real steering agent. However, only 15 months later, Schäuble had to resign after a party-finance scandal. Around this time, nine regional conferences took place. They were originally scheduled to discuss the CDU donation scandal with the party base. At these regional party meetings, the party’s secretary-general, Angela Merkel, emerged as Schäuble’s likely successor. Again, it was the CDU’s executive committee that nominated her; but it was a long time before Merkel herself publicly stated that she would like to take the office as party leader. She was elected by the party conference in 2000 and held the position for 18 years.

*From Merkel to Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2018*

After two lost state elections, considerable criticism towards Merkel grew throughout the party, which culminated in the deselection of her longtime associate and supporter Volker Kauder as chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German parliament in October 2018. She decided not to stand for the position of chair again at the next federal party congress in December 2018. Merkel justified her surprising renunciation of the party leadership by claiming that she wanted to open a gradual path for change. At the same time, she declared that she would not be competing again in the coming federal elections, but that she would remain as federal chancellor until then.

Immediately after the announcement, several candidates put themselves forward to replace her as leader, from which ultimately the executive committee accepted three: Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, secretary-general of the party since 2018 and the minister-president of Saarland; Jens Spahn, the incumbent minister of health; and the former parliamentary group leader in the Bundestag, Friedrich Merz, who had not been active in politics for many years. Spahn and Merz openly criticised Merkel’s policies, while Kramp-Karrenbauer was regarded as a confidante of the chancellor. Spahn was considered a representative of the conservative wing of the party; Merz was of the market-liberal part of the CDU; and Kramp-Karrenbauer combined pragmatic views with socially conservative attitudes (cf. Dostal 2019).

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7 The Christian Social Union (CSU), which stands in elections only in Bavaria, forms a joint parliamentary group with the CDU.
The executive committee imposed a fairly stringent eligibility requirement: each candidate had to be nominated by at least one local party branch (Hildebrandt 2018). Merz was nominated by the districts of Fulda and Sauerland; Spahn by Borken (his own); and Kramp-Karrenbauer by Saarland. Informally, however, they nominated themselves and sought the support of these associations afterwards. These three candidates were able to present their ideas, values and programmes to the members and the wider public at a total of eight regional conferences during November 2018, before the 1001 delegates to the federal party congress made the final decision. The regional conferences, which have only been used regularly since 1999, have developed into a kind of informal pre-decision stage in the CDU. Members as well as powerful agents of local or state party branches have some opportunity to participate in the selection of party leaders, since the executive committee cannot nominate candidates who would face considerable resistance from local and regional party activists (cf. Ding 2015: 171).

At the federal congress, Kramp-Karrenbauer prevailed on the first ballot with 45 per cent. Merz won 39 per cent and Spahn 16 per cent. In the decisive run-off between the top two, Kramp-Karrenbauer accounted for just under 52 per cent, Merz for just over 48 per cent. Prior to the vote, Kramp-Karrenbauer gave a personal and rather militant speech that addressed the membership directly. Merz, on the other hand, who had been depicted by the media as a favourite, presented himself more in the role of the “elder statesman” and addressed the wider public. He tried to take on the role as the next candidate for chancellor. This was probably a miscalculation of his own standing in the party, which indicates the importance of situational factors during the election process.8

8 Merz was to get a second chance, however. Kramp-Karrenbauer declared in February 2020 that she would resign from office in the following months. In April 2020 the CDU was due to select a new leader at a party congress. Three contenders claimed in a kind of self-nomination that they wanted to be Kramp-Karrenbauer’s successor: the minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia, Armin Laschet (with Spahn as his running mate); the chair of the parliamentary committee for foreign affairs, Norbert Röttgen; and Merz. This time, there would be no regional conferences, at which the individual candidates would introduce themselves, before the main party congress. The CDU was apparently put off by the SPD’s negative experience with the involvement of numerous members. Still, once again, congress delegates would have the chance to choose between three different candidates. As it turned out, the congress was postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.
CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the process of selecting the leader in German parties can be characterised as a kind of managed intra-party democracy, often with the party elite in a powerful position, but sometimes also very restricted in its ability to steer the process (Aylott and Bolin 2017). The SPD and CDU are open to more inclusive selection, which can occur as a result of not having a clear “crown prince”. It could be interpreted as a weakness of the parties’ executive committees that they fail to pre-select a leader. At the same time, open competition and greater inclusivity are thought to appeal to the growing expectations of the public, as well as party members. In comparison, the SPD seems to be more inclusive than the CDU, latterly integrating all the members in the decision over the party leadership. The CDU, in contrast, only allowed congress delegates to participate directly and vote in the leadership selection process.

In both cases, these intra-party competitions took place because there was no agreement between party elites about whom the party should select. Members were often given a say when different parts of the party could not agree and a consensus solution was not achievable (Astudillo and Detterbeck 2020). In such cases, an open leadership competition could solve the problem of internal disagreement or the absence of a convincing candidate. Open competition can thus resolve conflicts between different wings or factions of the party. This explains why self-nominations seem to have become a part of a new style of German leadership selection process. The power of steering agents is diminished in the face of internal struggles to integrate both a heterogeneous membership as well as elected representatives.

With the shrinking power of the steering agents, its empirical reflection—the executive committee—increasingly loses its grip on the leadership selection process. In the recent past, the SPD twice used a mechanism to give the current leader the power to decide over his successor—with very little success. It cannot be claimed that informal consultations are becoming worthless within the German parties: the Green party as well as Die Linke clearly prove the opposite. Within the AfD, the failure of informal consultation is prominently visible in the case of 2017, with Alexander Gauland acting as an “overnight self-steering-agent”. Another dynamic seems to have taken hold in the German parties, particularly in the SPD: raising the bars of eligibility requirements in order to compensate for the missing steering agents and to prevent chaos in the nomination process.
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