

Friedrich Merz Is Ready to Bury Angela Merkel

The German chancellor's most likely successor wants to end her way of doing politics.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Oct. 15, 2019, in Berlin), left, and German corporate lawyer and former parliamentary group leader of the Christian Democratic Union Friedrich Merz (Oct. 31, 2018, in Berlin). AXEL SCHMIDT,JOHN MACDOUGALL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

When Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer was first elected to the leadership of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, it seemed that Chancellor Angela Merkel had secured her legacy. Instead, she had colluded to reveal her own inadequacy. Kramp-Karrenbauer will now preemptively pass the chancellor's

coveted baton to someone eager to use it as a weapon against Merkel herself and the entire era of German politics she has presided over.

Kramp-Karrenbauer was the chancellor's hand-picked successor. In comparison to the young and relatively untested Jens Spahn, who also vied for the party leadership in December 2018, she seemed measured and well-reasoned. In comparison to the strident political veteran Friedrich Merz, another challenger, she seemed like a safe bet to keep the party from a sharp rightward shift. Kramp-Karrenbauer was relatively sober and restrained. She differed from Merkel on a handful of important political positions—most notably, she's been emphatic in her opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage—but she largely fell in line with the chancellor on economic issues. Most notably, despite some indications that Kramp-Karrenbauer might personally have tended toward a more conservative position on immigration, she adopted Merkel's stance on Germany's most divisive issue, promising generous immigration policies and a hard demarcation between the centrists in the CDU and the extremists in the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Kramp-Karrenbauer always inhabited an untenable position—though Merkel's personal popularity quickly rebounded after 2015's refugee crisis, her party suffered; those to the right of center complained that her immigration policies were unreasonably generous and would drive Germany into both financial ruin and cultural disarray. Merkel's progressive stance on immigration, meanwhile, was far from enough to entice left-of-center voters, whose furor over lackluster action on global warming, rising housing prices, and continued privatization rivals that of the right-wingers—though it's rarely expressed with the same implicit violence.

Merkel's ability to manage these tensions over the past few years depends on her political adroitness, yes, but also on her personal authority and the aura that attaches to her as the last member of the *ancien régime*. Even with those assets, Merkel's party was on the decline when Kramp-Karrenbauer assumed its leadership. Merkel resigned her position as the head of the CDU after the party lost double digits in its share of the vote in regional elections in Bavaria and Hesse, leading to widespread discontent within the party.

Kramp-Karrenbauer's career was also riddled with unforced errors, though. One sometimes had the feeling that she had announced a culture war and nobody else

came. When a German YouTube star attacked the CDU shortly before the European elections last May, she responded hyperbolically, claiming that his work was akin to propaganda; she compared same-sex marriage to incest, and she made juvenile jokes about intersex people. In the end, she seemed like a jester. Her reactionary sexual politics fell on deaf ears among German conservatives, even as they provoked outrage and fear among broad swaths of the public.

Kramp-Karrenbauer proved not only to be inept as a spokesperson for the party, however; she also revealed herself to be a poor manager of the CDU's internecine squabbles. After disappointing results in the European elections last spring, Kramp-Karrenbauer lashed out at both leftists, who she alleged were eroding popular support for the *Volksparteien* that had held extremists at bay since World War II, and simultaneously the right-wing of her own party, who she accused of undermining the campaign's messaging and unity. For Merkel, however, the last straw came when Kramp-Karrenbauer failed to maintain party discipline in the aftermath of regional elections in Thuringia. Because of a deeply divided electorate and the strength of the AfD, the state was unable to form a governing coalition after elections this past October. When the parliament met recently to appoint a leader for the state's government, however, members of the CDU joined with members of the AfD to elect Thomas Kemmerich of the economically liberal Free Democratic Party to the position of minister-president, shattering a taboo that had barred extremist parties from participation in governing coalitions since World War II.

For all of Kramp-Karrenbauer's failings, there was something comforting about her leadership of the CDU—though nicknames like “Merkel 2.0” and “Mini-Merkel” rubbed her the wrong way, it is easy to see why they were so popular for a while. If Kramp-Karrenbauer lacked Merkel's stern competence, she had something of the chancellor's earnestness and solidity. More importantly, however, she promised to continue a familiar legacy of governance. Whether a more talented politician might have been able to carry that legacy into one or more terms as chancellor is an open question. Even in the best of cases, however, it's impossible to imagine that such governance would have been able to fully contain nativist resentment, ecological anxieties, and economic frustration. Like President Emmanuel Macron in France, Chancellor Kramp-Karrenbauer would likely have struggled to continue a legacy that seems increasingly inadequate in today's world.

Since Kramp-Karrenbauer did blunder her way out of office, however, the future of the CDU—and of Germany more generally—has very much come up for debate. The three most popular contenders for the party's leadership represent very different futures for the CDU.

Jens Spahn, the 39-year-old minister of health, bears a resemblance to the American presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg that extends beyond his age and sexual orientation. Like Buttigieg, Spahn promises a revitalization of the current consensus, with a nuanced position on immigration, progressive stances on LGBTQ+ rights, and a focus on efficiency and tax cuts. Spahn, however, despite arguably being a more accomplished politician than Buttigieg, lacks some of the latter's wunderkind qualities, and his candidacy has failed to generate much excitement.

Moderate party insiders have focused hopes primarily on Armin Laschet, the head of the CDU in North Rhine-Westphalia, the country's most populous state. Laschet has a knack for party politics, a reputation for pragmatic governance, and an ability to build broad coalitions. On immigration, he may be to the left even of Merkel—he made a widely publicized visit to a Jordanian refugee camp during the refugee crisis and has consistently argued for a humanitarian approach to refugees. He's also positioned himself against austerity in Greece, arguing that drastic measures against Greece could only lead to a weakened European Union and increased opportunities for Russian influence to penetrate the continent. A CDU led by Laschet would almost certainly seek support in building a coalition government from the left, especially from the recently ascendant Greens.

If Spahn would stay the course and Laschet would veer a bit to the left, Friedrich Merz would tack hard to the right, pushing the CDU toward the AfD in an attempt to recapture voters that have fled to the populist right in past elections. Merz, an old rival of Merkel's, left politics in 2009 after getting marginalized by the chancellor. In the interim, he led investment firm BlackRock's German operations. Since announcing his return to politics in the race that led to Kramp-Karrenbauer's appointment to the leadership of their party, Merz has been advocating radically restricted immigration policies, and he is regularly in the headlines for his critical stance toward Merkel's leadership. In moments, he plays the populist to a T—pandering to nativist sentiments and promising large-scale tax rebates for average Germans. It's also apparent, however, that the role isn't native to him—he flubbed in the election against Kramp-Karrenbauer when he

claimed that he considered himself to be a member of the upper-middle class, causing a late-night host to joke, “People who have more than one airplane probably aren’t middle class anymore.”

It’s also unclear how Merz would form a governing coalition. The center-left Social Democrats, already embattled for their coalitions with Merkel’s government, would almost certainly refuse to enter into a coalition with Merz. Indeed, Merz himself has renounced the possibility of a traditional grand coalition. It’s hard to imagine that the Greens could collaborate with him without bleeding votes to other left-wing parties. In the long run, then, he might have to make a modified argument about containing right-wing extremism—one that took the AfD’s votes to form a coalition even while promising to contain its most radical elements. In this case, it’s unclear who would be using whom. German anxiety about extremism has largely been effective in insulating the AfD thus far. Furthermore, the right-wing party lacks effective leadership. Though Björn Höcke, the leader of the party’s far-right splinter group, is often presented as a charismatic strongman, he remains divisive even within the AfD and is almost entirely despised outside of it.

Instead, it is ostensibly centrist leaders like Merz who present the greatest threat. That Germans would consider voting for a far-right leader should hardly surprise close observers of the country’s politics—an undercurrent of right-wing radicalism has always infected German politics, including in the CDU. Indeed, there are many figures in the party who may be to the right of Merz: Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, for example, or Hans-Georg Maaßen, the former head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany’s internal security agency. Furthermore, a number of long-term sociological investigations have found widespread support for right-wing radicalism within the German populace. That a centrist party like the CDU might be led by a politician making nativist claims and praising his own business acumen can hardly be seen as unprecedented, either within Germany or in the midst of a global shift to the right.

Merz bears another, more surprising similarity to other populist leaders, however: his entanglement in allegations of corruption. In the midst of his campaign against Kramp-Karrenbauer in 2018, the offices of BlackRock in Germany, which hired Merz in 2016, were raided for suspected complicity in a series of dividend-stripping schemes that defrauded European taxpayers of at least 55 billion euros,

about \$60 billion. Given the high value that Germans have traditionally placed on both honesty and fiscal responsibility, this might have seemed disqualifying for someone aspiring to become chancellor.

Yet the story barely registered. Merz's stray remark about being middle class almost certainly hurt him more than the reasonable suspicion that he played an integral role in stealing billions of euros from German taxpayers. One feels certain that earlier generations of Germans would rather have demanded his head than elevated him to the head of state, but that may be no guide to the future. After all, who would have imagined that the leadership of the U.S. party with the most ardent Cold Warriors would eventually rush to forgive Russian interference in American elections?

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