

The eternal chancellor? Merkel's biggest obstacle to reelection will be uniting her own party

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Angela Merkel has been formally confirmed as the CDU's candidate for chancellor in the 2017 German federal elections. [Julian Göppfarth](#) assesses the key challenges that lie between Merkel and reelection, arguing that perhaps the most important priority will be to bring together members of the CDU who are increasingly critical of her leadership.



Germany's Iron Lady, Madame Non, Mutti – Angela Merkel has been given many names during her now more than eleven years as chancellor. At a party convention in December, she was [re-elected](#) Chair of her conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) for the ninth time since 1999, officially becoming the party's candidate for the 2017 federal elections. Since then, a new title has been circulating in the German media: the “[eternal chancellor](#)” – a title that was once applied to Konrad Adenauer, who was chancellor for 14 years (1949-1963) and Helmut Kohl, whose 16 years as chancellor (1982-1998) reached its climax with German reunification in 1990.

At first glance, Merkel appears to fit the “eternal chancellor” label perfectly. This is first of all because there appears to be nobody in the CDU capable of and willing to replace her. Despite an apparently slow demise in her power that has been colourfully termed *Merkeldämmerung* (an allusion to Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* – the twilight of the gods), no real challenger has emerged. Although facing opposition in the face of the refugee crisis, crumbling support for her *Willkommenskultur* and populist attacks from the Bavarian CSU, Merkel has nevertheless stated on several occasions, most recently during her [speech](#) at the party convention, that people had begged her to run once again in the hope of her acting as an anchor of stability in turbulent times. After a long period of reflection, it seems, she has humbly accepted the burden of running again: the task being portrayed as a duty that she had to fulfil, with Merkel remarkably urging her party to help her in what she describes as “[the most difficult election campaign since German reunification](#)”.

Alongside the lack of internal challengers within the CDU, the other German parties, first and foremost the Social Democrats (SPD), also find themselves in no position to challenge Merkel either. As the leader of the SPD, Sigmar Gabriel has the so-called “first right of access” to the party's candidacy. But after three years as minister of economic affairs during which he first called for TTIP, then claimed that the free trade agreement was a “[dead horse](#)”, before subsequently pushing through CETA, his popularity is far from soaring. His attempt to bridge the gap between his roles of representing the party's working class and progressive constituencies as SPD Chair on the one hand, and securing the interests of German industry as a minister on the other, has undermined his credibility. Another possible candidate is the current mayor of Hamburg, Olaf Scholz. Though highly popular and successful in Hamburg, Scholz is perceived as an uncharismatic technocrat in the rest of Germany.

The most promising candidate is said to be Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament. While he has already announced his intention to leave the European political stage and to “[defend Europe from Berlin](#)”, the exact role he will play in German national politics remains unclear. The most likely outcome is that he will replace Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is set to follow Joachim Gauck as the next German President in February 2017, as foreign minister. However, given that the federal elections will take place in September of the same year, he would only have a mere six months to gain enough momentum to really pose a threat to Merkel. Schulz is perceived as being just as authentic as Merkel and is popular for his passionate and charismatic way of doing politics. Yet, given his absence from domestic politics throughout most of his political career, he has so far remained a relatively unknown figure for many Germans. It remains to be seen if 6 months as foreign minister will be enough to allow Schulz to become a

credible alternative to Merkel.

Finally, the general state of the SPD, which has suffered a decline in fortunes ever since Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 reforms, could prove to be too large a hurdle to overcome for any candidate, no matter how popular or charismatic they may be. Since Schröder lost to Merkel in 2005, the SPD has typically been assigned around 20-25 per cent of support in opinion polls. After seven years of coalition governments between the CDU and SPD (2005-09 and 2013-16), Merkel's adoption of classic left-wing policies (the minimum wage, an end to nuclear power, calling Islam a part of Germany, and welcoming refugees) has almost made the SPD politically invisible for some voters.

Merkel, on the contrary, has taken on the role of "uber-politician", securing Germany's interests in European and global politics while hovering above the minor domestic quarrels that exist between the SPD and CDU. Viewed from this perspective, both parties have the feel of two wings of a larger centrist party, presided over by Merkel, rather than two competing parties representing opposing policy-platforms. That this perception even exists inside the SPD could be seen when a leading SPD politician stated in 2015 that due to Merkel's "[excellent way of governing](#)" and the meagre chances of an SPD candidate, his party might as well consider not putting forward a candidate at all. As a consequence, the SPD is unlikely to seek another four years as a junior partner in a CDU-led government, unless it aims to further drown itself under Merkel's all-embracing centrism.

But while there may be no obvious alternative to Merkel as chancellor at present, there are at least three reasons to question the 'eternal' nature of her rule. The most prominent threat to Merkel's hegemony is undoubtedly the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). The post-election options for a CDU-led government will depend largely on how many disappointed conservative voters the AfD, which has gained momentum during the refugee crisis, can encourage to shift allegiances. While the party narrowly failed to clear the five percent threshold required to enter parliament in 2013, it is certain that it will succeed on this front in 2017.

A recent snapshot of the polling shows the AfD around the 13 per cent mark, with the CDU around 35 per cent, the SPD around 22 per cent, the Greens on 11 per cent, Die Linke on 9 per cent, and the liberal FDP on 5 per cent. But support for the AfD may well increase once the election campaign starts for real. Currently, the party is going through a period of internal turmoil as it determines whether it will follow its present leaders Frauke Petry and Jörg Meuthen or the increasingly influential hard-line approach of Björn Höcke and Alexander Gauland. In any case, it is clear that the CDU will not enter a coalition with the AfD under Merkel, leaving only the options of a coalition with the FDP (in the unlikely event of the CDU gaining more than 40 per cent of the votes and the FDP crossing the 5 per cent threshold) or a coalition with the Greens.

This latter option seemed unthinkable just a few years ago, but the Greens have fundamentally changed since they first became a member of the SPD-led government between 1998 and 2005. Far from the stone throwing anarchists and ecological fundamentalists of their founding years, their maturity in local and national government brought to light a brand of green conservatism that is most popularly embodied by Winfried Kretschmann, who was recently reelected as Minister President in Baden-Württemberg under a coalition between the Greens and the CDU.

Kretschmann [has openly stated](#) his admiration for Merkel on several occasions, indicating that he could not imagine someone more suited to leading the country. This political romance is apparently also increasingly popular among some CDU members looking for alternative coalition options. The Minister President of Hessen, Volker Bouffier, who has been heading a CDU-Green government in the state since 2014, has shown himself to be [supportive](#) of a coalition between both parties at the national level. Yet, the progressive wing of the party may still be too dominant to allow these conservative dreams to come true.

However, the least obvious, but possibly most important factor for Merkel's reelection prospects, will be the actions of her own party. Since her earliest days as party Chair, she has never had strong support among the party base. This was mainly a result of her origins. Coming from eastern Germany, she joined the CDU after a previous career in science and thus was never as rooted in the party base as Kohl and many of her competitors had been. She also lacks the backing of a strong local CDU association (she comes from the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern which

has a weak CDU membership). On the other hand, it was this outsider status that allowed her rapid rise to top government posts under Kohl and that made her a welcome 'untainted' candidate to reform the party after the seemingly endless and affair-ridden late Kohl years. But above all, this has made her a chancellor whose strength is primarily based on the strong support of voters from the centre rather than on loyalty from the party base itself.

This became obvious during the refugee crisis when, led by the Bavarian CSU and its leader Horst Seehofer, sections of the party withdrew their support for Merkel and called for a return to the conservative roots that Merkel had allegedly betrayed. The result has been an unprecedented situation for the CDU: with no visible alternative, the party base is formally supporting Merkel, and indeed gave her almost 90 per cent of the votes in the recent party leadership election. But under the surface, many oppose her centrist approach. Fearing the loss of their parliamentary seats to the AfD, many members of the CDU have opted for a stance of opposing Merkel's more liberal stances on integration.

Merkel has tried to even out the dissent by embracing a partial burka ban, but the party base has still agreed on ending possibilities for dual citizenship, an issue that has become highly contentious with the refugee crisis but that Merkel has repeatedly opposed. And with support from the CSU, many have even called to [make integration and immigration one of the core issues of the 2017 election](#). This is significant as it openly shows opposition to Merkel strategy for the election campaign, namely [focusing](#) on what she has called "more important issues such as the economy, Europe and unemployment".

What has become apparent is that there is a deep split within the party that might risk support for Merkel's reelection in the months to come. Driven by increasing pressure from the AfD, the question of how far the party will shift to the right and thus oppose Merkel's centrism, might become the most decisive and unpredictable of the three factors affecting Merkel's candidacy. It is possible that the same party that has formally made her a candidate for "eternal chancellor", might be the one standing in her way to join the ranks of Adenauer and Kohl.

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