

# LETTER FROM BERLIN

## German Election Scorecard



*The bursting of the Greens' Baerbock bubble and the emergence of the CDU's Laschet. But the Greens aren't going away.*

BY KLAUS C. ENGELEN

**D**evelopments in early summer may hint at the outcome of this year's German federal elections in September.

Delegates to the Green Party conference, most connected digitally over a weekend in mid-June, adopted an election manifesto that calls for fast-tracking the switch to carbon neutrality over the next twenty years and vowing to turn Germany into a "socio-ecological market economy." Annalena Baerbock and her co-leader Robert Habeck were confirmed with 98 percent.

According to Matthew Karnitschnig, the Berlin correspondent of *Politico*, "All she had to do was look in the camera, wave at the small audience and walk off the stage with a big smile that said 'mission accomplished.' Instead, Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Green candidate for chancellor, dropped an s-bomb. 'Scheisse!' she declared into her still-open microphone after delivering a 45-minute convention speech to party faithful Saturday. Baerbock was apparently aggravated about flubbing a line in her

address. ... That beginner's mistake was one of several to plague the forty-year-old candidate in recent weeks, sowing doubt over whether she's really ready for prime time."

### BUBBLE BURSTING

For the Greens, who entered Germany's political arena in 1980, April 19, 2021, was supposed to be a historical day. In a well-orchestrated media coup, the Greens presented their co-leader Baerbock as the party's candidate to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor in September's national elections. Baerbock has been a member of the Bundestag since 2013. She convinced her fellow party leader Habeck (51), a former state minister of Schleswig-Holstein for environment and agriculture, to leave her the big job of running for the chancellor position. The two co-leaders of the Greens came into office in 2018 and were able to turn the formerly fragmented party into an effective campaign machine with one big goal: to govern again.

Thanks to their dynamic young candidate for chancellor, the Green

party rose in national polls to almost 30 percent and at times overtook Armin Laschet's CDU. During the spring, a Green chancellorship seemed within reach.

As *Politico's* Karnitschnig reported, Baerbock "couldn't have hoped for a better launch of her campaign. Her face was on cover of Germany's biggest magazines. She was *the* get on the primetime talk shows that Germans watch obsessively. With the governing Christian Democrats tripping from scandal to screw-up and back again, the Greens looked like the adults in the room. In some polls, the Greens even surpassed the long-dominant Christian Democrats, triggering speculation that Baerbock might even succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor. It didn't take long for the wheels to come off."

For the German media, the Baerbock fairy tale was a great publishing opportunity. On April 24, 2021, Baerbock appeared on the cover of *Der Spiegel*. The magazine rolled

---

*Klaus Engelen is a contributing editor for both Handelsblatt and TIE.*

out the story of “two against one,” and how Baerbock will conquer the chancellor for the Greens. She faces Armin Laschet and Olaf Scholz, who represent the former big tent parties CDU and SPD. As *Der Spiegel* puts it, “Two lawyers against a political scientist with a focus on international law. Two governing professionals against a parliamentarian with no executive experience. Two representatives from Germany’s traditional big-tent parties against the candidate of a party hoping to become the next big-tent party.”

The magazine’s editors support the view that “Germany finds itself at a crossroads: The pandemic has mixed everything up and many erstwhile certainties have now been called into question. ... In September, an unsettled, unnerved country will be going to the polls. The pandemic could largely be under control by then, but the climate crisis certainly won’t be.”

And on the CDU/CSU’s claim to the chancellorship: “For the first time since 1949, the chancellor will not be up for reelection. There will no incumbent bonus. The era of Angela Merkel is coming to an end ... It is a completely new situation for the country, and the outcome is open. But it looks as though there is no getting around Annalena Baerbock.”

Here one could ask why the journalists at *Der Spiegel* didn’t look more closely at Baerbock’s résumé. When Baerbock’s professional background, as was to be expected, received deeper scrutiny, a string of embarrassing lapses—failing to declare thousands of euros in income and manipulating her

**Der Spiegel: “Germany finds itself at a crossroads: The pandemic has mixed everything up and many erstwhile certainties have now been called into question.”**

resume—came to light and the Green bubble started bursting. She also got into trouble with some of her statements about what she will do in the government, which were shortened to toxic threats such as, “Baerbock wants to do away with budget flights and no more €29 tickets to Mallorca.”

The June 10, 2021, *Sonntagsfrage Bundestagswahl* by pollsters Infratest Dimap puts the CSU/CDU Union at 28 percent voter support, the Greens

**Politico: “With the governing Christian Democrats tripping from scandal to screw-up and back again, the Greens looked like the adults in the room.”**

at 20 percent, followed by the Social Democrats at 14 percent, the Alternative für Deutschland at 12 percent, the Free Democrats at 12 percent, the Linke at 7 percent, and others at 7 percent.

#### A BIG WIN

There was an unexpected big win for the Christian Democrats in Merkel’s home state of Saxony-Anhalt that contradicted the predictions of most pollsters, who were expecting big wins for the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland. This was an important development, since it demonstrated that a strict CDU policy of non-cooperation with the far-right AfD can mobilize voters to strengthen the conservative alliance as bulwark against the far right. *Der Spiegel International* wrote: “With just a few months to go before the German general elections, the conservatives took a big step in the right direction by winning the state vote in Saxony-Anhalt on Sunday. The right-wing populist AfD failed to live up to expectations.” Former rival for the CDU chair Friedrich Merz, who is now working in Laschet’s campaign as a heavyweight economic policy and business expert, claims that “without

the nationwide trend, this result would not have been possible.”

#### THE HARD LINE WORKS

The CDU currently governs Saxony-Anhalt in a coalition with the Social Democrats and the Greens. For Laschet, the outcome of the last state election before the national elections was a big boost.

The dreadful specter of a right-wing AfD pulling ahead of the CDU and damaging the standing and functioning of the state did not become reality. This gives the governing CDU more confidence with respect to the coming national election. They can count on voters in the eastern states to help in the fight with the far right. In some states, the AfD has been under surveillance by the German domestic intelligence service since January 2021, a factor for voters to take into account.

In Saxony-Anhalt, the center-right CDU under its popular state governor Reiner Haseloff won 37.1 percent, a 7.3 percentage-point improvement from the 2016 elections. The AfD came in second with 20.8 percent, 3.5 percentage points lower than in 2016. According to voter flow statistics, 16,000 former AfD voters have moved to the CDU. Together with former voters of SPD and Linke, Haseloff’s CDU could count 45,000 voters who in 2016 gave their ballots to other parties. In addition, 61,000 new CDU voters probably were mobilized by the threat that the far-right AfD would come in first.

The Linke (Left) suffered a historically low vote count of 11 percent, a loss of 5.3 percentage points. The SPD received 8.4 percent of the vote, 2.2 percentage points lower than in 2016. With only 5.9 percent, the Greens finished at the bottom of the list, which shows the weak position of the Greens in Germany’s eastern states. After a decade of not being represented in the state’s parliament,

the business-friendly Free Democrats returned with 6.4 percent, part of a country-wide FDP upward movement. On the federal, state, and communal level, the FDP was able to broaden its voter base thanks to sharp criticism of the German pandemic lock-down.

### DISUNITY COST VOTERS

In October 2018, Chancellor Angela Merkel told her fellow Christian Democrats that she would not seek re-election as party chairwoman, a position she has held since 2000, and also would not seek a fifth term in 2021. Since then, the power base in the German political system has changed significantly.

For decades, the conservative CDU/CSU alliance at the center of Germany's party spectrum—to quote *Der Spiegel's* assessment—worked like an “election campaign machine—highly disciplined with its sights fixed on the goal: power. In the 2021 election year, though, it's the other way around. The Greens seem like a machine that is just warming up. In the case of the CDU and CSU, you almost have to wonder if they still have enough fuel.”

Did the movers and shakers in the CDU and CSU not realize what it will mean campaigning in the next elections in a more difficult political environment, without being able to mobilize political capital in terms of the trust and credibility of an Angela

**Eurointelligence: “The burst of the Baerbock bubble allows the Greens to focus on the issues, rather than having to sell what turned out to be an unprepared candidate. If the Greens come out of these elections in a strong second place, they would have done very well.**

Merkel who governed with four different coalitions for sixteen years?

There was the failed CDU leadership of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who was not able to enforce the party rule of strict non-cooperation with the AfD in the eastern state of Thuringia. She took over the German defense ministry when Ursula von der Leyen rose to become president of the European Commission.

Then came the battles among Laschet, Merz, and Norbert Röttgen, the contenders for the CDU party chair on route to win the chancellor candidacy for the CDU/CSU. Party members and potential voters could see the deep divisions in the alliance.

As governor of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's largest state by population, Laschet was from the beginning in a pole position. Merz, an old rival of Merkel's and a former head of the U.S. Blackrock investment fund giant's subsidiary in Germany, came with strong backing from the business side with the promise to halve the voters of AfD in the eastern states. Röttgen, as chairman of the Bundestag's Foreign Affairs Committee, brought foreign policy and security experience into the leadership race.

On January 16, 2021, in the second ballot at the party convention, Laschet was elected CDU chairman, supported by 53 percent of the delegates. In April, he announced that he would like to be the common chancellor candidate for the CDU/CSU, at the same time as Markus Söder, the CSU head and governor of Bavaria, put his hat in the ring. Söder pointed to his much better standing in the opinion polls.

This led to a bitter and bruising standoff until the early morning of April 20, 2021, when Laschet won the backing of senior party members in a 31–9 vote of the CDU executive board.

A few days before, the ARD-DeutschlandTrend pollsters found that 44 percent of German citizens and 72

percent of CDU/CSU party supporters favored the Bavarian governor as the best and most promising chancellor candidate in the coming national elections. By contrast, only 15 percent of German citizens and 17 percent of CDU/CSU party members favored the governor of North Rhine-Westphalia who, in the refugee crisis of 2015, stood behind Merkel but showed weak leadership when the Covid-19 pandemic spread in his state.

A separate opinion poll by INSA for the tabloid *Bild* came out with a forecast that the CDU/CSU bloc with Laschet would struggle at a 27 percent level of support in the fight for the succession to Merkel, compared with a much stronger support level of 38 percent if Söder were the contender.

### DON'T WRITE OFF THE GREENS

The editors of the Brussels-based *Eurointelligence* who follow the Baerbock drama warn: “Do not underestimate the strong support the [Green] party enjoys. What we have seen in the last two months is that Baerbock is not ready for the job of chancellor. The Greens have not prepared for high office. The burst of the Baerbock bubble allows the Greens to focus on the issues, rather than having to sell what turned out to be an unprepared candidate. Most of the Greens are focused on the issues anyway, not the candidate. If the Greens come out of these elections in a strong second place, they would have done very well. Baerbock could be a foreign minister in the next coalition. Habeck would be the finance minister. Perhaps even more important would be the possibility that Katrin Göring-Eckardt could replace Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a Social Democrat, as German president. The point is that there are bigger issues at stake for the Greens than whether their inexperienced co-leader is going to become chancellor this year.” ◆