

From Scholz to Merz: The capricious politics of the post-Merkel German chancellorship

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The performance of chief executives depends on the resources and skills incumbents bring to bear, and the contexts in which they operate. Regarding the latter, the legacies of former leaders mark an understudied factor that shapes the opportunity structures of their successors. This article provides an assessment of the evolution of the German chancellorship since the departure of long-term leader Angela Merkel (2005–21). Her two successors in the office of chancellor, Olaf Scholz (2021–25) and Friedrich Merz (since 2025), displayed fundamentally different political personalities, strategies, and styles. Scholz tried to win office and present himself as “another Merkel.” While this facilitated his rise to power, it also played a role in his downfall. Merz, by contrast, started out as a candidate framing himself as an “anti-Merkel” as much as an “anti-Scholz.” With hindsight, however, both labels seemed to be largely owed to his role as opposition leader and were conspicuously dropped right at the beginning of his chancellorship. The future of the German chancellorship, and Germany’s future role in Europe and the world, will be strongly shaped by the ongoing transformation of the German party system.

Keywords: Angela Merkel; chancellors; chancellorship; Friedrich Merz; Germany; government; leadership; Olaf Scholz.

1. Introduction

The German chancellorship is widely seen as a hub of executive power that dwarfs the powers of most prime ministers on the European Continent. To some extent,

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such perceptions may result from a widespread confusion of the political and economic weight, or the sheer size, of a given country with the more particular powers of the head of government, which obviously supports notions of powerful German chancellors. Yet, also with regard to the institutional resources, Germany ranks among the top tier of established parliamentary democracies hosting institutionally powerful chief executives (Bergman et al. 2021: 687–91). While the German Basic Law has been amended nearly 250 times over the past three-quarters of a century, the constitutional rules concerning the political executive have remained virtually unchanged. Indeed, contemporary German chancellors still operate under a constitutional regime once created to keep Weimar at bay, and to help maintain government stability even under the most unfavorable circumstances. Unlike most of their counterparts, German chancellors emerge from a secret parliamentary election, and can be removed from office during a legislative term only by the election of a direct replacement candidate (the so-called “constructive vote of no-confidence”).¹ Another much-debated, and contested, constitutional resource of the chancellor is the “policy guidelines competence,” which allows chancellors to determine the overall direction of government policy (see Section 2.2). From early on, these constitutional stipulations have been accompanied by powerful administrative resources. The Federal Chancellor’s Office belongs to the best organized and most efficient “executive headquarters” in the world.² Importantly, institutional factors in the wider sense also include parties and the party system. Indeed, a seminal attempt to gauge prime ministers’ power classified key features of the party system as even more important than most constitutional resources available to the head of government (Bergman et al. 2003: 179–94), which can be fruitfully applied to the German case: most chancellors strongly benefitted from the Federal Republic’s stable party system, and a culture of intra-party governance that shielded incumbents from being toppled by challengers from within the chancellor’s party.

The political roots of popular notions of the Federal Republic as a supposedly “chancellor-centred regime” were laid in the early post-war years. The chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer (1949–63) prompted observers to coin the ambiguous term of “chancellor democracy,” which continues to shape public debates about effective executive leadership in Germany (though, taking into account the rather mixed experience of nearly eight decades, is more of a myth than an apt description of constitutional practice; see Helms 2024). The German political parties identified

¹Comparative empirical research reveals that the constructive variant of the no confidence vote tends to significantly prolong the duration of governments. In the German case, this device extended the potential duration of governments between 1949 and 2021 for, on average, 84 per cent (Rubabshi-Shitrit and Hasson 2022: 583).

²That said, in particular thanks to the strong departmental principle and coalition government, the German “core executive” is at the same time marked by a significant level of dispersion (Hundehege and Hustedt 2022).

the chancellorship early on as the unchallenged focal point within an otherwise strongly dispersed democratic regime. The invention of the office of “chancellor candidate” in the early 1960s, whose holder does not have to be the party’s official leader, marked a crucial step in that regard, and a notable departure from Westminster-style party government (Helms 2020a).

Some of the most spectacular recent developments in German politics relate to the largely unexpected increase in chancellor candidates, and the changing share of the vote for those parties making a direct bid for the chancellorship. Historically, the CDU/CSU³ and the SPD were the only parties nominating chancellor candidates. This monopoly was lost in 2021, when there were, for the first time, genuine chancellor candidates from three different parties (not counting the FDP “mock candidate”: Guido Westerwelle, in 2002)—Olaf Scholz (SPD), Armin Laschet (CDU), and Annalena Baerbock (Alliance 90/The Greens)—which together won 64.5 per cent of the total vote. The “re-chancellorization” of German federal elections—conceptualized by Springer et al. (2024) as the share of the vote won by those parties nominating a chancellor candidate, and the independent weight that candidates had on voters’ decisions—continued into 2025, when the country witnessed no less than four chancellor candidates: Olaf Scholz (SPD), Friedrich Merz (CDU), Robert Habeck (Alliance 90/The Greens), and Alice Weidel (AfD). The parties nominating a chancellor candidate in 2025⁴ won an overall 77.4 percentage share of the total vote, the highest figure since 1994 (when the CDU/CSU and SPD together secured 77.9 per cent). At the same time, with 45 per cent, the combined share of the vote of the former “people’s parties” (i.e. CDU/CSU and SPD) fell to a historical record low, and the “candidate effect” on the electoral performance of the Social Democrats (Scholz) and the Christian Democrats (Merz) remained notably modest, too (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2025). These changes at the level of candidates have been accompanied by important developments at the level of the media and public opinion surveys that further fueled notions of a regime revolving around the chancellor. Since 2002, a highlight of every Bundestag election contest has been the live-televised

³CDU and CSU are Christian centre-right “sister parties” sharing core values with each other but maintaining separate party organizations. Though the CSU is a regional party that exists only in Bavaria (as the direct equivalent of the CDU state party organizations in the other 15 states), both parties have formed a joint parliamentary party group in the Bundestag since 1949. They do not compete with each other for electoral support on either level, and there is just one joint CDU/CSU chancellor candidate at Bundestag elections. That said, when it comes to staffing executive offices at federal level, both parties have picked their personnel for assigned posts autonomously. More than that, some CSU ministers have occasionally positioned themselves as powerful veto-players of CDU chancellors, as, for example, Horst Seehofer in the third Merkel government (Hertner 2022: 474–77).
⁴There was yet another chancellor candidate—Sarah Wagenknecht from the left-wing populist *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* that split off from The Left early in 2024 (Thomeczek 2024)—who was, however, widely considered by both the media and the wider public as a “fake chancellor candidate,” which seemed justified in retrospective with the party failing to win any seats in the 2025 Bundestag election.

showdowns between the parties' chancellor candidates, which have seen different formats (with classic duels between the candidates from the two "people's parties" until 2017, and new formats with three or even four candidates in 2021 and 2025 respectively). It fits the bill that most major popular opinion surveys have come to include the question as to whom Germans would vote for "if there was a popular election of the chancellor," though there obviously is not.

The institutions in place shape the agency of chief executives, and this is how it is possible to distinguish patterns of behavior not just at the level of individual administrations but for whole countries (see King 1994; O'Malley 2007). At the same time, every incumbent is different, and even the same incumbent tends to change over time (Rose 2000; Bennister et al. 2015). The more elusive, but important, factors that shape a new leader's opportunity structure include the performance and the legacies of former leaders. Other things being equal, legacy effects usually increase with an incumbent's length of tenure and affect the immediate successor in particular. Long-term leaders generally tend to create weak and vulnerable successors (Horiuchi et al. 2015; Helms 2020b). This pattern also applies to German chancellors (Helms 2025). Angela Merkel (2005–21) marks a particularly fascinating case in point. Overall, she arguably cast even longer shadows than Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl, serving as a central point of reference for contenders for the chancellorship from different parties not just in 2021, but hardly less so in 2025. While CDU/CSU chancellor candidate Friedrich Merz sought to frame himself as an "anti-Merkel," his counterpart from Alliance 90/The Greens, Robert Habeck, declared he wanted "to close the Merkel gap" (Lunday and von der Burchard 2025; Handel 2025).

The first part of this article is devoted to an assessment of Olaf Scholz' rise to power and his performance as chancellor, operating in the long shadows of "Madame Chancellor" (Mushaben 2017). In stark contrast to most other successors to long-term leaders, who seek to distance themselves from a departing leader to leave their own mark, Scholz did whatever he could to come over as "a new Merkel." This did not save him, however, from ending up as the outright opposite of Merkel in terms of popularity, longevity, and political clout. The article then goes on to evaluate the very first steps of the chancellorship of Friedrich Merz, who followed Scholz as chancellor in 2025, and look into some of the factors likely to shape the German chancellorship in the years to come.

2. The rise and fall of Olaf Scholz

2.1 The making of chancellor Scholz revisited

The single most important feature of the context characterizing Scholz' rise to power in 2021 was the absence of an incumbent chancellor seeking reelection. Having come under pressure from various directions after four election victories in

a row and growing public discontent over her government's performance, Merkel offered an "incremental retreat," thereby creating something like a "lame-duck chancellorship." This would include her stepping down as CDU party leader about a year into her fourth term, to be followed by vacating the chancellery at the end of the regular legislative term, about 3 years later. The leadership change at the CDU party leadership took place in late 2018, when the party elected Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the minister-president of Saarland, as Merkel's successor. While Kramp-Karrenbauer was widely perceived to have been Merkel's preferred choice also as her successor in the chancellery, she never really got a grip on the party and eventually made way for another CDU party leadership contest as early as 2021. This brought in Armin Laschet, the minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia, who then also became the CDU/CSU's hapless chancellor candidate in the 2021 Bundestag election.

The incumbent chancellor not running for re-election marked an important historical first in German political post-war history. Perhaps paradoxically, this came to work as a strong catalyst for advanced levels of personalization (Küpper 2022: 16–17). Under these circumstances, Olaf Scholz sought to exploit his position as minister of finance, and "vice chancellor"⁵ in the last Merkel government to the full. In fact, Scholz entered the race as a supposed *de facto* incumbent—a strategy that could work only under these highly particular conditions. Under these circumstances even his failed attempt to win the SPD party leadership in 2019 (Helms 2021: 17–18) turned into a blessing in disguise. It served his attempt to present himself as "another Merkel"—able to offer both continuity and change, or "change without disruption" (Robinet-Borgomano 2021), while downplaying the partisan element—extremely well.

As a candidate, Scholz tried to capitalize on his status as "vice chancellor," the supposedly closest equivalent to the position of a sitting chancellor seeking re-election, by pointing out that he was the only candidate on the scene with extended experience as a government minister at the federal level. His claimed role as an "heir apparent" to Merkel, if one from a different party, was greatly facilitated by the fact that the CDU/CSU's chancellor candidate (and CDU party leader), Armin Laschet, apparently did not enjoy Merkel's explicit support. Of course, Merkel, while having developed a reputation for having a lukewarm relationship with her party early on, did not go as far as to recommend the election of a different party. But Merkel's leadership approach as a chancellor, which was with few if important exceptions marked by pragmatism (Mushaben 2017; Helms and van Esch 2017; Schnee 2020), made it comparatively easy for Scholz to locate himself

⁵The "vice chancellorship" is an office unknown to the Basic Law, which just acknowledges a deputy with no independent constitutional resources. Importantly, the position of deputy is usually held by the most senior minister from the coalition party, not the chancellor's party, and in combination with a major cabinet portfolio.

as a candidate apparently close to the Federal Republic's most popular chancellor ever that Merkel was.

There were in fact striking parallels between Merkel and Scholz that became visible even before the 2021 Bundestag election and the change in the chancellery. Especially by British standards, both Merkel and Scholz were notably poor public speakers and communicators—features that were framed as strong “pros” by their respective teams, in terms of a deliberately cautious and responsible style. But Scholz did not completely leave it to the public to possibly detect familiar traits; indeed, he specifically highlighted the “typically Northern features” in his and Merkel’s personality and leadership style, namely being down-to-earth, self-controlled, and reasonably cautious. These and other initiatives were clearly tailored to capitalize on the widespread “emotional ambiguity” among the German electorate, which was slightly tired of “Merkel rule” after more than one-and-a-half decades, but still anxious about what might come in Merkel’s stead.

Scholz’ apparent aspiration to present himself as “a new Merkel”—if certainly more in terms of appearance and style than public policy—remained highly tangible in the aftermath of the election. The emerging “traffic light” governing coalition (SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens, and FDP) was hailed by the chancellor as a “progress coalition” that had come to stay for at least a decade, providing the foundation for another long-term chancellorship. In some regards, Scholz even tried to present himself as “a better Merkel.” While Merkel’s chancellorship has been widely acknowledged as a major accomplishment not just for the chancellor herself, but for women in Germany (and beyond) more generally, Merkel was never a fully committed advocate of “women’s issues.” Her various cabinets never reached an equal number of male and female ministers, and her first cabinet included fewer women ministers than that of her immediate predecessor, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (both overall and with regard to the share of women ministers from the chancellor’s party).⁶ By contrast, Scholz referred to himself as a committed feminist, and made a pledge early on to create a cabinet with a perfect gender balance. His original cabinet team sworn in on 8 December 2021 included eight female and male departmental ministers each. As the Liberals were considerably less committed to that aim than the chancellor himself, and Alliance 90/The Greens, it was for Scholz to honor his election promise by nominating three female and just two male departmental ministers from the SPD.

The government format marks a feature that strongly shapes the opportunity structure chief executives face. While single-party vs. coalition government tends

⁶There were 13 ministers at the start of the final Schröder government (2002), including six women overall, with five of the ten SPD ministers being women. By contrast, there were 15 ministers overall in the first Merkel government in 2005, five of whom were women ministers, but only two of the five CDU ministers were women. These distinctions are important as the chancellor’s powers regarding the hiring and firing of ministers are, even under the most favorable conditions, *de facto* limited to portfolios held by his or her own party (see note 3).

to make the biggest difference, as long as both have majority status, the number and type of coalition parties are important, too. That said, the challenges for Merkel and Scholz to manage their cabinets were still more similar than for most other chancellors. Both Merkel's grand coalitions (in place from 2005–9 and 2013–21) and Scholz' three-party coalition, involving two smaller parties to the left and right of the chancellor's party, made it extremely difficult to meet the immodest public expectations of a "chancellor democracy." Merkel's "comfort zone" in terms of her party's share of cabinet ministers was even smaller than Scholz' both at the beginning and the end of her term (with only five out of the 15 ministers from the CDU in 2005, and six out of 15 in her final government, compared to seven SPD ministers out of a total of 16 cabinet ministers in the Scholz government formed in late 2021).

Furthermore, both chancellorships were strongly shaped by major crises that had to be dealt with by the chancellor. Crises obviously tend to be of a very different nature (t Hart 2014: ch. 6: 129–35). However, the very fact that both Merkel and Scholz faced, and had to address, largely unforeseen events that swiftly turned into major crises of the first degree (in particular the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, the pandemic, and the Ukraine war) clearly set them apart from leaders operating in less turbulent times and, again, facilitates a reasonably fair comparative assessment.

2.2 Scholz and Merkel's leadership performance compared

Given the defining features of the German party system, "chancellorial leadership" necessarily involves coalition management. There is no established tradition of cabinet committees in Germany, though similar to the situation in Britain few decisions are actually made by the full cabinet, which explains the major importance of informal coalition governance (Debus et al. 2021: 265–70). Overall, Merkel's coalition management worked rather smoothly (Glaab 2017), if not equally well at all times, which may have had to do with the different parties involved. Over her extended tenure, Merkel chaired three CDU/CSU-SPD coalitions (2005–9, 2013–18, 2018–21), and one CDU/CSU-FDP coalition (2009–13). In 2024, Merkel noted, with hindsight, that the FDP had been "no easy partner" (ZDF 2024), which is remarkable, as it could be reasonably expected that a purely "bourgeois" majority coalition government should be easier to handle for a Christian Democratic chancellor than any other coalition. Yet, indeed, the beginning of Merkel's second term, when the chancellor chaired a Christian-Liberal coalition and was new to this task, was arguably her most difficult time in terms of political authority and public reputation (Saalfeld 2010; Helms 2011).

The challenges awaiting Scholz were complex and serious from the very start. His coalition—and its key protagonists—not only created particular constraints at the level of intra-executive decision-making but also affected his public status as

chancellor. Specifically, Scholz faced two powerful contenders for public attention: FDP party leader, Christian Lindner, who as minister of finance held the most powerful portfolio of all; and Green co-party leader Robert Habeck, combining the roles of “vice chancellor” and super-minister for the economy and climate protection. Both Lindner and Habeck, despite their strikingly different personalities and styles, were gifted public speakers, well able to steal the chancellor’s show.⁷ There were occasions on which Scholz considered it necessary to remind his adversaries, and the public, that *he* was the chancellor, which would have been largely inconceivable for Merkel.

A look at the handling of formal powers of office puts Merkel and Scholz in close vicinity to each other, though again with apparently minor but important differences. While sacking ministers does not belong to the usual activities of German chancellors (indeed there have been just three clear-cut cases since 1949)⁸, both Merkel and Scholz dismissed a minister: in 2012, Merkel ousted Norbert Röttgen, her environmental minister from the chancellor’s party, over protracted policy differences. Twelve and a half years later, on the night of 6 November 2024, Scholz dismissed his minister of finance, Christian Lindner, again over a major policy issue⁹, which was of course a different game, as Lindner was the party leader of one of the SPD’s two junior coalition partners. Lindner’s departure marked the immediate end of the government formed in late 2021, transforming it into a Red-Green minority government.

The so-called “policy guidelines competence,” as acknowledged in Art. 65,1 of the Basic Law, has been something of a favorite subject of more than two generations of German scholars and students of politics and public law. It is the focal point of notions of “strong leadership” in what is otherwise very much an “anti-leadership environment.” The chancellor’s “guidelines competence” allows the chancellor to set certain parameters of public policy, within which departmental ministers can act as they see fit and have to take political responsibility for their actions. In constitutional practice, the “guidelines competence” as an officially operated constitutional device has been, most of the time, conspicuous by its absence. In particular politically strong chancellors usually do not need to remind others of their “constitutional reserve,” why formally making use of that

⁷Looked at from a wider comparative and theoretical perspective, what shaped their roles no less than their personalities and personal resources, was their policy distance from the chancellor and their respective party (Debus et al. 2021: 265–66): Both clearly represented the political core beliefs of their respective parties, and were chosen with little regard for the chancellor’s preferences, which made compromises unlikely and costly.

⁸In particular, major “recasting” cabinet reshuffles, launched by a prime minister in order to give his or her government a facelift, which in the German case would have to include replacing ministers from the coalition party, are not an option (Helms and Vercesi 2024: 1171–74).

⁹The constitutionally enshrined so-called “debt brake,” designed to limit public deficits to 0.35 per cent of gross domestic product, was the apparent key issue, which however affected a whole series of deeply contested issues.

device tends to signal the chancellor's weakness rather than underscores his or her superior authority. Merkel alluded to the existence of this constitutional device only once, back in 2018, when trying to keep the CDU's sister party, CSU, in line over the handling of the refugee crisis and its implications. By contrast, Scholz did make use of the "guidelines competence" explicitly when sending out a formal letter to the ministers involved, desperately trying to put an end to the protracted intra-coalition fights over finally switching off all German nuclear plants (Jacobsen and Bethke 2022). The public perception of this episode was very much in line with the aforementioned logic; it certainly did not increase the political status of the chancellor.

Crises, in politics as in other areas, are of a deeply ambivalent nature. While it is popular to think of some crises (such as in particular natural disasters) as welcome opportunities especially for executive leaders to increase their authority and popularity by performing as crisis managers, this is clearly a possibility rather than a foregone conclusion. For Merkel, the Euro crisis and the European refugee crisis in 2015 constituted a unique testing ground that revealed Merkel's long-hidden capacities as a "conviction leader" sticking to her guns at the risk of losing the support of even some of her closest political peers and allies (Helms et al. 2019; see also Wehrkamp 2020). Merkel's handling of the Corona crisis was less impressive, though the pandemic clearly resulted in a process of concentrating decision-making power in the chancellery (Manow 2021). No less importantly in terms of authority and style, Merkel did not shy away from formally apologizing to the German public in a primetime live TV message on 24 March 2021 for mishandling a particular pandemic-related issue, the so-called "Easter lockdown" (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2021).

Scholz faced his own set of challenges and crises (Zohlhörer and Engler 2024), by far the single most important of which being the war in Ukraine. Scholz set out to make this the defining moment of his chancellorship when launching his "Zeitenwende" speech in the Bundestag on 27 February 2022, suggesting that Germany, Europe and the world were entering a genuinely new age. This created wide-ranging expectations of an entirely new leadership role for Germany, with no one else than the chancellor himself in the driving seat. These expectations were to be greatly disappointed, though. While the classic narrative of Germany's role in the post-World War II world was that the country should not take a leading political role for historical reasons, the events since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine rather suggested that the Scholz government, and the chancellor in particular, were largely unable to perform that envisaged leadership role (Schoeller 2023). Intriguingly, despite their very different positions on the classic left-right-axis, both the Greens and the FDP were staunch supporters of Ukraine and opponents of Russia, including the delivery of any type of weapons to Ukraine, thereby putting Scholz and the SPD on the spot.

It cannot, of course, be decided here if, or to what extent, Scholz' refusal to send certain types of weapons to Ukraine was an act reflecting a deep conviction that certain steps must be avoided at any expense in order not to fundamentally endanger Germany's security status, just as Merkel's determination in 2015 to keep German borders open for refugees from Syria and elsewhere. Yet, Scholz' overall performance does not strongly suggest such a reading. Also, it was not only the particular type of challenge and crisis of the Ukraine war that brought Scholz' limitations as crisis manager to the fore. His performance when visiting flooded areas in late 2023 and early 2024 to assess the scene and meet affected local residents, was perceived as contrasting rather unfavorably with the performance of previous chancellors at similar occasions, as well (Sommer 2024). The chancellor's performance when confronted with the deadly attacks in Munich and Aschaffenburg early in 2025 was different, however, and revealed a less lethargic side of Scholz' personality (Frankfurter Rundschau 2025).

Apart from his crisis leadership rhetoric, Scholz' communication—or rather the apparent absence thereof—became a hallmark of his chancellorship early on. While Merkel was repeatedly, indeed almost continuously, accused of failing to publicly justify her decisions (or non-decisions), this kind of “tacit governance” reached unprecedented levels under Scholz. If Britain had its “Maybot,” Germany had its “Scholzomat.” While Theresa May may have found it difficult to dance, Scholz was often simply at a loss for words, and when he spoke, he often did so in an erringly strange and unemotional manner that provoked comedians to imitate him.

The most striking difference between Merkel and Scholz certainly relates to their strongly differing popularity scores. While Merkel was, at her peak, the most popular chancellor in the Federal Republic's history, and never really lost her public appeal until her eventual farewell, Scholz was the most unpopular chancellor on record, and time and again featured among the most negatively rated contemporary German top politicians.¹⁰ While these popularity scores reflected Merkel's and Scholz' perceived leadership performance, it seems that both, in the eyes of the German public at least, also possessed significantly different levels of “likeability.” At some stage of her chancellorship, Merkel gained the nickname “Mutti” (mom), which was originally coined with a critical and contemptuous undertone, but increasingly captured also a diffuse feeling among many voters that Merkel generally could be trusted. As early as 2013, only halfway through with her chancellorship, Merkel could afford to deflect doubts about the credibility of her agenda for the upcoming legislative term with the words, “you know me!.” Scholz never even came close to enjoying this kind of public trust; he was perceived as arrogant and aloof even by many long-standing supporters of his party.

¹⁰Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, ed., Politbarometer, various issues, <https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Archiv/>

A key factor in its own right shaping the evolution of the Scholz chancellorship was the quick depletion of Merkel's reputation as a responsible leader, which set in almost immediately after the outbreak of the Ukraine war early in 2022. Merkel was personally made responsible by many to have made Germany way too dependent on Russian gas. Other key criticisms focused on Germany's digitalization lag and the country's rotten infrastructure in public transport and beyond. For a leader having modeled his whole approach on his long-term predecessor, it was impossible not to get dragged into the downturn struggle of Merkel's ailing legacy and declining public recognition (Helms 2025: 222–23). But Merkel was not just increasingly useless as a political patron saint. In late 2024, Merkel took the highly unusual step to publicly criticize the chancellor for his handling of the dismissal of his finance minister, supposing that he had violated the dignity of the office (ZDF 2024).

The coalition breakup on 6 November 2024 was followed by a confidence vote triggered by the chancellor in the German Bundestag about 6 weeks later. A lost vote is the only way to bring about early elections, as German chancellors do not possess the right to dissolve parliament, and the Bundestag has no right of self-dissolution, nor can the federal president act in the absence of a negatively answered confidence vote in the Bundestag. The motion of confidence posed by Chancellor Scholz in the German Bundestag on 11 December 2024, with the vote being held on 16 December, differed strongly from earlier occasions. In fact, when previous chancellors lost a confidence vote in the past (Brandt in 1972, Kohl in 1982, and Schröder in 2005), it was a well-arranged attempt to clear the way for early elections with the MPs forming the "chancellor majority" abstaining to allow early elections to take place. Not so in December 2024, when the negative vote—with 394 no votes, 207 yes votes, and 116 abstentions—sealed the end of a politically crippled minority government.

Importantly, neither the concrete date for the confidence vote in the Bundestag, nor, and in particular, that of the Bundestag election was determined by a "sovereign" decision by the chancellor. As to the confidence vote, Scholz initially would have wanted to hold it only early in 2025 with elections taking place in March 2025, but eventually had to give in to the opposition and the wider public's pressure for an earlier date. While Art. 67,1 of the Basic Law shields incumbent chancellors from being toppled by negative majorities unable to agree on a successor, it would have been virtually impossible for the diminished Scholz government to carry on for very much longer without a parliamentary majority, and in the face of mounting parliamentary and public opposition. Further, once a confidence vote has been answered negatively, it is for the federal president, not the chancellor, to decide on the Election Day, which is to be scheduled within the next 60 days. The date for the elections to the twenty-first Bundestag, 23 February 2025, was set after informal consultations by the president with government and opposition

leaders. Thus, while the election result for Scholz and his party was disastrous indeed, it cannot reasonably be explained by a public grudge specifically about what Schleiter and Tavits have termed “incumbent opportunism” in calling early elections (Schleiter and Tavits 2018). Specifically, the very idea of snap elections implies that incumbents are able and willing to exploit particularly favorable opportunities to their advantage (Schleiter and Tavits 2016). Even though the German public eventually blamed the early end of the “traffic light” government more on the FDP than the SPD, there was no apparent window of opportunity for Scholz in early November 2024: while Scholz apparently hoped he could make a comeback, repeating an election surprise similar to that of 2021 (Helms 2022: 78–81), the prospects for the Social Democrats could have been hardly any bleaker. A survey of voting intentions taken in the week of the coalition break-up, showed a 33–16 per cent lead in favor of the CDU/CSU (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2024). At the same time, it was not that Scholz, whose political personality was the exact opposite of a gambler, simply wanted to try his luck. Very much unlike President Macron when calling an early election of the French National Assembly out of the blue, and with no necessity, in June 2024, Scholz rather seemed to have come to a point in November 2024 where intra-coalitional pressures had become unbearable politically and personally.

The Bundestag election held on 23 February blew the Social Democrats out of the chancellery, making Scholz the shortest-serving chancellor in more than half a century. Scholz’ case stands out also from a wider historical perspective: while Chancellors Ludwig Erhard (1963–66) and Kurt-Georg Kiesinger (1966–69) had even slightly shorter tenures than Scholz, they both completed the federal elections of 1965 and 1969, respectively, as chancellor candidate of the largest party in the new Bundestag. Further, the 2025 election marked the first time that the SPD became only the third-largest party in a newly elected Bundestag, alongside four other parties (CDU/CSU, AfD, Alliance 90/The Greens, and The Left). After a SPD election campaign which had very much focused on Scholz—with one of the most prominent campaign spots being organized around the rhetorical leitmotif “*Ich wähle Olaf Scholz*” (I vote for Olaf Scholz)—this result can to some considerable extent be seen as a verdict on Scholz performance as chancellor. Indeed, on the eve of the election, Scholz’ public standing was the lowest on record for any of the Federal Republic’s chancellors (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2025). That said, the 2025 Bundestag election result clearly suggests that the performance of the Scholz government as a whole, and not just of the chancellor himself, was perceived rather unfavorably by the German electorate. All three (former) governing parties suffered heavy losses (SPD 16.4 per cent, –9.3 percentage points, FDP 4.3, –7.1, and Alliance 90/The Greens 11.6, –3.1), while all opposition parties made significant gains (CDU/CSU 28.6, +4.5, AfD 20.8, +10.4, The Left 8.8, +3.9).

3. The arrival of Friedrich Merz, and the future of the German chancellorship

If Scholz was for a long time an unlikely chancellor candidate, this was true even more so for Friedrich Merz. Merz had left politics in 2009, a few years after Angela Merkel had disempowered him by wresting the CDU/CSU parliamentary party group leadership from him in 2002. He reappeared about 10 years later, determined to succeed Merkel first as CDU party leader and then as CDU/CSU chancellor candidate, and chancellor. But he failed to win the CDU party leadership (against Kramp-Karrenbauer) in 2018, and again in 2020 (this time against Laschet), before eventually succeeding at the third attempt early in 2022. After that, Merz soon moved to expand his power base by also securing the CDU/CSU parliamentary party group leadership in the Bundestag. While CDU party leaders are in pole position for securing the CDU/CSU chancellor candidacy, winning the CDU party leadership does not automatically imply winning the chancellor candidacy as well.¹¹ However, the major damage done by the protracted infighting between Laschet und CSU party leader and Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder that strongly shaped the 2021 campaign (Helms 2021: 19–20), worked in Merz' favor when it came to producing a quicker and smoother decision in 2025.

To many, Merz' complete lack of experience in any government office (at either federal or state level) was his single most important characteristic, distinguishing him not just from Scholz but from most earlier chancellor candidates, and from all previous chancellors. At the same time, Merz was the near-perfect equivalent of a Westminster-type Leader of the Opposition—a position not known to the Basic Law or the Bundestag's standing orders (in terms of particular public resources and privileges assigned to it). More importantly, there has also been no established tradition of chancellors being ousted by an opposition leader operating from the Bundestag.¹² In 2005, Merkel became the first ever “parliamentary opposition leader turned chancellor” after winning a Bundestag election with her party, and the self-proclaimed “anti-Merkel” Merz followed in her steps two decades later.

One notable feature of Merz' profile as a public persona, which weakened his status as opposition leader committed to ousting the incumbent chancellor, concerned his constantly low levels of public popularity. Even when Chancellor Scholz' popularity scores were reaching record lows, Merz could hardly profit from this in terms of being seen as a more attractive alternative. Indeed, Merz rarely ever figured among the reasonably popular German top politicians, trailing behind

¹¹ Indeed, both Kohl in 1980 and Merkel in 2002 left the CDU/CSU chancellor candidacy to “internal” competitors from the CSU.

¹² Kohl combined the office of CDU party leader and CDU/CSU parliamentary party group leader from late 1976 until 1982, but he was not the CDU/CSU's chancellor candidate in 1980, and when he eventually became chancellor in late 1982, he did so thanks to unseating the sitting chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, by a successful constructive vote of no confidence, without involving the German electorate.

both chief representatives from the Scholz government (such as Boris Pistorius and Robert Habeck) as well as from the opposition parties (such as Markus Söder). More problematic for Merz than his low likeability scores, which were cushioned by the steadfast support of his party, proved his widely perceived lack of credibility.

The credibility issue emerged a few weeks before the 2025 Bundestag election when Merz, apparently driven by the public outrage about the series of bloody attacks in Mannheim, Munich, and Aschaffenburg, introduced a motion in the Bundestag that demanded a dramatic tightening-up on asylum-seekers and other would-be migrants. The key problem was that this motion was passed with the votes of the CDU/CSU, parts of the FDP and—crucially—the right-wing populist AfD, thereby undermining Merz’ long-standing public pledge to avoid any legislative cooperation with the latter. Merz’ credibility suffered even more when he initiated an agreement with the SPD over a huge debt package worth 1 trillion Euros in the immediate aftermath of the Bundestag election, after explicitly having ruled out during the campaign to lift the constitutionally enshrined “debt brake.” While the disturbing meeting between President Trump and President Zelenskyy in the White House on 28 February 2025, casting fundamental doubts about the US’ future involvement in European security, marked a welcome opportunity to introduce a 500 billion Euro package for national defense, the other 500 billion Euros devoted to infrastructure renovation could not in any meaningful way be reconciled with the CDU/CSU’s election pledges. Delicately, this inter-party deal with the Social Democrats (eventually also supported by the Greens in exchange for allocating one fifth of the 500 billion Euros package for climate protection) was struck and executed using the parliamentary majority of the departing rather than the newly elected Bundestag.

The official explanation given by Merz and others was that in the new Bundestag, which hosts a significantly strengthened AfD and Left, the three democratic mainstream parties, even when joining forces, would not have been able to muster a two-thirds majority needed for making any constitutional amendments, such as required for passing the 1 trillion Euros debt package bill. From a different angle, this move looked like a showcase of one of Machiavelli’s key lessons for early modern princes, namely that all atrocities should be committed swiftly and at once, as “that way there’ll be less time for people to taste its bitterness and they’ll be less hostile,” while “favours [or in the more modern language of party government: distributive measures likely to please recipients across the board] should be given out slowly, one by one, so that they can be properly savoured” (Machiavelli 2014: 37).

As a chancellor-designate, Merz (with the CDU/CSU winning just 28.6 per cent of the vote) stood out by having the smallest “chancellor party” support base of all previous chancellors except Scholz in 2021 (25.7 per cent). The coalition-building process gave a first impression of how much the chancellor’s, and his party’s,

power would be divided and constrained in the new government—the fifth, but by far smallest “grand coalition” government between CDU/CSU and SPD in the Federal Republic’s history.¹³ While past German governments, including the Scholz government (Grotz and Schröder 2022: 83–85), have been formed very much in line with “Gamson’s law” (according to which the distribution of ministerial portfolios corresponds closely with the share of parliamentary seats held by each of the coalition parties, if usually with a slight overcompensation of smaller government parties; see Linhart et al. 2008; Debus et al. 2021: 261–263), the CDU/CSU’s junior coalition partner SPD gained an exceptionally strong representation at the cabinet table in 2025. Counting only ministers, the SPD’s 36.6 percentage share of “coalition seats” in the Bundestag was worth 41.2 per cent of the cabinet seats—thus, exactly the same as the CDU’s 50 percentage share of seats, both controlling seven portfolios each.¹⁴ The CDU’s representation in government remained statistically “undervalued” even when counting not just full cabinet ministers but the chancellor as well. On that score, the ratio between parliamentary and cabinet seats for the CDU was 50.0–44.4 and 36.6–38.9 for the SPD (with the CSU’s government representation decreasing from 17.6 to 16.6 per cent). The two most important details concerning the distribution of portfolios among the parties concerned the assignment of the ministry of finance to the junior coalition party SPD (thus, prolonging the pattern established by the final Merkel government and the SPD-FDP-Green coalition under Scholz), and the assignment of the foreign ministry to the chancellor’s party (for the first time since the 1960s).

As with Merkel and Scholz on previous occasions, Merz’ role in the selection process of government ministers was circumscribed by the claimed autonomy of the other parties, including the CDU’s sister party CSU (see note 3). In terms of gender, the seven ministers that Merz picked for the CDU—three women and four men—were closer to Merkel’s choice in 2005 (two women out of a total of five ministers from the chancellor’s party) than to Scholz’s in 2021 (three out of five). Regarding the chancellor’s position in the core executive decision-making process, and public perceptions of leadership performance, the change at the head of the Chancellor’s Office—from Wolfgang Schmidt under Scholz to Thorsten Frei under Merz—could turn out to be the most important innovation, though. While Schmidt was an efficient administrator operating behind the scenes, Frei was a genuine politician enjoying public discussion and debate, including regular appearances in TV talk shows.

The chancellor election in the Bundestag on 6 May 2025 marked a first major blow to the emerging government: Merz became the first ever candidate suffering

¹³The CDU/CSU-SPD coalition under Merz had not just the smallest parliamentary majority of all “grand coalitions” (52.1 per cent of seats) but also a smaller majority than many previous “regular” two-party coalitions involving just one of the (former) “people’s parties” plus a junior partner.

¹⁴The full figures for all governing parties are as follows: CDU: 50.0/41.2; CSU: 13.4/17.6; SPD: 36.6/41.2; all figures rounded.

an embarrassing surprise defeat on the first ballot. He received just 310 yes votes, i.e. six short of an absolute majority, which meant that no less than 18 of the 328 MPs from the CDU/CSU and SPD had withheld their support. It was a weird irony that Angela Merkel was present, watching the spectacle from the visitors' gallery of the Bundestag. After hectic debates behind closed doors, Merz eventually secured the necessary absolute majority on the second ballot held in the afternoon the same day (325 yes, 289 no, 1 abstention). As the vote was secret, it is bound to remain unknown who the dissenters were. There were speculations that they included those having their ministerial ambitions seen disappointed, but there may have been more fundamental reservations about Merz and his policies and style at work, such as in particular his spectacular U-turn on public borrowing. As a candidate's performance at this stage is widely seen as an important seismic test for a newly incoming incumbent and the viability of his or her government,¹⁵ the bumpy start of the Merz government may, in hindsight, well turn out to have been more than an unhappy accident.

Merz' inauguration speech before the Bundestag on 15 May 2025 provided decent proof that he had successfully managed to swipe the role of opposition leader with that of chancellor in terms of rhetoric and style. Starting with a note of gratitude to Scholz, for "having guided Germany through times of exceptional crises," and calling his reaction to the outbreak of the Ukraine war as "seminal" and "historic," he went on to highlight selected key items from the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition agreement. The organization of the speech suggested that, as to his own role as chancellor, Merz was willing to give preference to Germany's role in Europe and on the international stage, as he clearly did as soon as the government got into action. His announcement to make the Bundeswehr the strongest conventional army in Europe made headlines, but it was difficult to identify any "buzz phrase," which the inauguration speeches of several earlier chancellors became famous for (such as Brandt's announcement that his government wanted "to dare more democracy"). If at all, Merz' claim that "The state is all of us. We can overcome all challenges, no matter how big, through our own strength," was curiously reminiscent of Merkel's contested "*Wir schaffen das!*" (We can do it!) from 2015.

If Merz had a free choice to associate himself with any of the previous German chancellors, it would presumably be the Federal Republic's "founding chancellor," Konrad Adenauer. However, for the time being, Merz' place in political time remains deeply uncertain. The challenges facing his government—including three consecutive years of economic recession, a digital backlog, a rotten infrastructure, and a whole series of international issues waiting for authoritative decisions—were certainly big enough to impress even the most determined leader. Thus, it is not clear at all if Merz will actually be going down in history as a "reconstructive leader"

¹⁵For the figures and a comparative assessment of previous chancellor elections in the Bundestag since 1949, see Helms 2022: 81–83.

(Skowronek 1993: 36–39). Indeed, given the unique mix of wicked challenges that have come to mark his chancellorship, he might well end up with a record closer to Scholz’ than to that of the historical epitome of “chancellor democracy.”

4. Conclusion

The office of German chancellor is not precisely what its holder chooses and is able to make of it, to adapt Herbert Asquith’s famous quote about the office of British prime minister. While German chancellors have been powerful both in institutional and, more often than not, political terms, their office and roles, are less flexible, and “designable,” than those of British prime ministers. Specifically, chancellors are more constrained than their counterparts in Westminster. Still, the different leadership philosophies and skills of individual incumbents do make a difference in Berlin just as in London—perhaps even more so than in the executive-centric world of Westminster, which provides any newly incoming prime minister with a set of institutional resources that invariably make him or her “preeminent,” if not necessarily “predominant” (Heffernan 2003).

Institutionally, the German chancellorship looks set to further gain in stature in the years to come. Once completed, the Chancellor’s Office, currently being reconstructed and expanded for an estimated amount of nearly 800 million Euros, will leave observers in little doubt about where to look to for leadership. The crucial challenges facing German chancellors and the chancellorship will be of a genuinely political nature, though. More than ever since 1945, a right-wing populist party, assessed by the German authorities as being, at least in parts, “confirmed right-wing extremist,” has been the elephant in the room (Hansen and Olsen 2024). The AfD constitutes not just the largest opposition party in the twenty-first Bundestag (for the second time, after 2017–21); a survey published in April 2025 found it to be Germany’s largest party at the national level, ahead of the CDU/CSU (Zeit online 2025). For a democratic regime long admired for its remarkable capacity to produce viable “bipartisan” solutions, agreed between the two biggest players across the different levels of the complex German polity, and largely independent of the party complexion of the federal government (Schmidt 2008), the dramatically increased status of the AfD marks an element of change difficult to overestimate. And while there is a shared commitment among the other four parties in the Bundestag to “freezing the AfD out,” the evolution of the latter’s public support base is still likely to become the ultimate indicator of the Merz government’s perceived performance.

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