

# German elections: the “competence team” of the conservative opposition

## A hotbed of conflicting interests

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Last Wednesday, Angela Merkel, the leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), introduced her so-called “competence team” for the upcoming September federal elections. Presented as a closely knit lineup of senior members from the CDU and its Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), a closer look at its composition reveals the exact opposite. The CDU and CSU (together known as the Union) are both riven by deep divisions, with numerous diverging interests competing against one another.

In the weeks leading up to the election, the nine Union party members are due to campaign on their reputed areas of expertise. The announcement of the team was supposed to prove the closeness within the Union parties. Merkel, the Union’s candidate for German chancellor, told a gathering of party members, accompanied by scores of journalists, that “we have a high degree of unity, which we are now using to focus on these fundamental questions.” This comment was intended to enforce discipline within party ranks and prevent further unannounced policy proposals by members—a characteristic of the Union’s campaign to date. Merkel warned that Germany was in its greatest crisis in the post-war period. A dramatic turnaround is necessary, she said. With the presentation of her election team, “we will show that we can do it better,” the candidate added.

To maintain some resemblance of unity, Merkel took a leaf out of the book of her political mentor and former German chancellor Helmut Kohl, taking into account the differing political and regional interests within the CDU/CSU. The premier of the state of Saarland, Peter Müller, is to be responsible for economy and employment. The minister for social affairs in Lower Saxony, Ursula von der Leyen, will cover welfare and health; the education minister in Baden Württemberg, Anette Schavan, will take on education. The other team members are former federal minister Gerda Hasselfeldt (agriculture, consumer affairs and the environment), Bavarian interior minister Günther Beckstein (interior affairs), chairman of the North Rhine Westphalia state branch and current vice-president of the German Bundestag (parliament), Norbert Lammert (culture), Merkel’s predecessor as CDU chairman Wolfgang Schäuble (foreign affairs), and the premier of Thuringia Dieter Althaus (reconstruction of east Germany).

The assembled media, however, gave the most attention to

Merkel’s specialist for finance and the federal budget, tax lawyer Paul Kirchhof, who is not a member of any political party. A former judge of the German Constitutional Court and currently a university professor in Heidelberg, Kirchhof advocates a radical reduction in taxes, continuing the example set by the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition government, which has massively redistributed income from the bottom to the top of society. Under his plans, the top income tax rate would fall from the current 42 percent to just 25 percent—a proposal far more radical than the 39 percent advocated by the CDU in its election programme. All forms of tax relief for average workers would be dispensed with, including the commuter rebate, relief for night-shift workers and other tax write-offs. Kirchhof is the spiritual father of the so-called “beer coaster tax concept”—a tax concept so easy it can be written on a beer coaster—of CDU finance expert Friedrich Merz. Merz had previously demanded a top tax rate of 36 percent that, after an internal party dispute, was never adopted. The CDU’s traditional coalition partner the Free Democratic Party (FDP) immediately threw its support behind Kirchhof.

Although Merkel said that, with the exception of Althaus, “all members are in principle ready” to participate in a future cabinet as ministers. She named further candidates who would also be suitable for government positions and explicitly declared that the “competence team” is not a shadow cabinet, but rather a means of filling posts after the election. The selection of the current “experts” was not to be seen as a “decision against anyone,” she said.

The emulation of Kohl’s old “clientele policy” was clearly visible. Merkel is attempting to keep a lid on conflicting political conceptions by promising posts to powerful members of the state organisations. However, in contrast to Kohl, Merkel has not grown to become an influential figurehead within the party apparatus by sitting atop her own state organisation. Rather, she is the lowest common denominator in an environment in which she must accommodate the state leaders with their own insider network of contacts.

With the presentation of the “competence team,” the jostling and scramble inside the Union for positions in Berlin, as well as the orientation of the party itself, has not come to an end. On the contrary, it has reached a new and more advanced stage.

The premier of Bavaria and CSU chairman, Edmund Stoiber,

agreed to join Merkel in presenting the team. However, he himself was not a member of it. Stoiber has been the cause of much of the conflict in the last few weeks between the two Union parties.

First, he announced that he would decide whether or not he would make himself available for a government position only after the election, something that Merkel resents. Merkel wanted to have former Siemens chief Heinrich von Pierer in her cabinet as minister for economics. However, because of Stoiber's indecision, she was not able to offer him the position, and in the end, Pierer rejected her offer. In the meantime, Stoiber has made overtures indicating that he would like to become a super minister for economics and finance, as well as the foreign minister in a Union federal government.

Then came his comments denouncing the east German voters as dumb and ungrateful. The comment followed the latest opinion polls showing the Party of the Left (a union of the Party of Democratic Socialism, the former ruling state party in east Germany) and the Election Alternative grouping (comprising ex-SPD and trade union bureaucrats) has become the strongest party in eastern Germany. His comments were not merely a faux pas, as some commentators have suggested. It was not the first time Stoiber has attempted to achieve "dominance over Bavarian bar room politics," as he himself once put it, and worked to mobilise the dregs of society, irrespective of the consequences this had for the CDU (which, unlike the CSU has representation in the east).

"Here lies the deep root of the constant skirmish between Merkel and the people's party of the CSU," remarked the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper. "The chancellor candidate is driven by a deep feeling that she has to change as much as possible as quickly as possible. That the prosperous west has to undergo the adjustment process for conditions of globalisation in order to make changes to the entire system. The key themes are longer working hours, an end to the social financing of the welfare state, reductions to the power of the unions. Edmund Stoiber, more of a technocrat than a politician, at least realises that the absolute majority of the CSU in Bavaria will be threatened by such policies. The conservatism of the CSU permits it to understand that, from the point of view of the electorate, there is much in the social and welfare state that is worth preserving."

Stoiber is, however, only one of the Merkel adversaries within the Union. *Der Spiegel* newsmagazine judged the premier of Saxony, Christian Wulff, "the most dangerous opponent of Merkel in the CDU." Wulff has also had designs on the chairmanship of the party and was also seen as its potential candidate for chancellor. The magazine wrote that as leader of the state opposition in Saxony, he sought to move closer to Merkel, but "since he came into [state] power, he has kept his distance."

The premier of Hessen, the right-winger Roland Koch, is also of the opinion that Merkel is taking the position that is due him. He rejected Merkel's offer to join her in Berlin. Koch, however, came to an agreement with Merkel and said he would send his closest confidant Franz Josef Jung. Jung, the current CDU fraction chief in the state parliament, will supposedly receive an appropriate post. *Der Spiegel* magazine wrote, "In this way, Koch has a close associate in the capital and can continue to develop his politics from Hessen."

There exist no great political differences between Wulff, Koch and Merkel. Merkel, just like her internal party adversaries, is convinced that a radical programme of cuts to welfare and social services has to be implemented. To cite just one example, Merkel stated in a speech given in Berlin on October 1, 2003: "The current income tax law is beyond repair. We need a new one. There will be howls and the grinding of teeth, but it must be done. Germany's capacity for reform will greatly depend on whether it can finally manage to introduce major taxation reforms, with simple and lower tax rates. Professor Kirchhof has conducted pioneering work in this regard, and we will incorporate his basic principles in the CDU."

At its party congress in Leipzig at the end of 2003, the CDU adopted the radical tax reduction model of Friedrich Merz. Kurt Faltlhauser, the CSU finance minister in Bavaria, vehemently opposed it and ensured that the concept was put on ice within the Union. The CDU also adopted a plan for a flat-rate health insurance scheme. This was also blocked by the CSU. In the combined election programme of the Union parties, one finds proposals, omissions and compromises in formulations in which varying positions have been painfully balanced.

The naming of Kirchhof to the competence team of the Union is in this context a manoeuvre by Merkel against Stoiber and the CSU, because Kirchhof is not only the spiritual father of the Merz taxation model, his elevation strengthens the CDU's ties to the FDP.

The increasing conflicts in the Union are closely bound up with the globalisation of production and the resulting changes at the economic base of society. What worked in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, especially under Helmut Kohl—control of the party through a wide network of personal connections and patronage—is completely breaking apart under conditions of globalisation.

International corporations are mercilessly demanding the destruction of wages and living standards. Individual states now compete against each other for their share of international capital. For the state premiers, the economies of their "own" states and their relationship to the worldwide capital market has become more important than federal politics.

In addition, the CDU and CSU represent, due to their own histories, the most varying political conceptions, from classic conservatism to the neo-liberalism of the FDP to the Catholic social policies of CDU old-timers like Norbert Blüm and Heiner Geibler. Notwithstanding the holiday phrases about unity and closeness surrounding the presentation of the "competence team," the Union is characterised by division and conflicts, while the party as a whole is clearly moving to the right.



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