

Christian democracy in Germany – an insight into the English- language scientific literature

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August 2021

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Keywords: *Christian Democratic politics is commonly associated with the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) in Europe. Although the federal elections are approaching, a topic that deserves plenty of attention in its own right, it is also crucial to understand the past decade of Christian democracy in Germany. This article would like to contribute to this effort by providing an insight into three relevant English-language research articles on the topic.*

Keywords: *Christian Democracy, German Politics, CDU, CSU, party politics, scientific literature*

Introduction

Christian democratic politics is commonly associated with Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, Christian Social Union (CSU), not just in Germany but throughout Europe (and even the world) as well. It is always easily justified to focus on the expectations and possible political outcomes when the date of the forthcoming federal elections is approaching - in the case of Germany, September 26. This responsibility belongs to political scientists, country specialists, and journalists¹ who closely follow German party politics and employ measures of quantitative political science to analyze party polls, candidates, and other significant topics. This overview does not elaborate on these issues. Rather, its ambition is to present some valuable products of the scientific literature which focuses on German Christian democracy in the past ten years. Although one could rightly assume that there is an immense amount

of English-language literature on the topic based on its political relevance, this is not the case. Naturally, not all of them are included in this summary, but this overview will present three articles to provide an insight into the different paths of researchers' perspectives. Two articles (the first and the third) come from recent years and focus on party politics. The second one presents a more historical perspective but displays some vital dilemmas of Christian Democratic politics. This article will highlight, interpret, and comment on the central idea of these articles.

Jörg Michael Dostal: From Merkel to Kramp-Karrenbauer: Can German Christian Democracy Reinvent Itself?

One of the main questions for politics and political scientists in Germany is the succession of Merkel or the outlook of what is known as the 'post-Merkel' era. Obviously, the greatest challenge for the CDU is to reorganize the party by, most importantly, choosing a new electorally successful party leader. Summarizing Merkel's chancellorship shortly and presenting the three potential CDU leaders is the central ambition of Jörg Michael Dostal's article titled *From Merkel to Kramp-Karrenbauer: Can German Christian Democracy Reinvent Itself?*, published in *The Political Quarterly* in 2019.² The author first focuses on Merkel's successful past (2005-2015), highlighting her political strategy (such as the move to the political center through co-opting other parties' policies), socio-economic stance, socio-cultural shifts (from conservative to liberal and progressive values), and crucial policy decisions. One of the less-fortunate significant changes that happened in the Merkel era was the increase of social inequality, which also has several political implications, such as disillusionment with politics or transition of loyalty to Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). One of two policy-making conflicts is also connected to this question, argues Dostal, by pointing to the "post-2003 welfare retrenchment and labour market deregulation (so-called 'Hartz reforms'), under the former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD)",³ but which was also accepted by the Greens and the CDU/CSU opposition. The author concludes that these reforms led to a more limited concept of social protection, which resulted in the demoralization of the SPD voter base and, consequently, the entrenchment of "Union parties" in control of government coalitions.

The second large-scale change with political consequences was connected to Merkel's decision to open Germany's border to refugees and migrants in Autumn 2015 without consulting with its parliament or other EU countries. On the one hand, civil society representatives and media celebrated the decision, but (especially after sexual assaults and other crimes) public attitudes shifted, and "a massive backlash occurred that is still ongoing",⁴ writes Dostal. The long-term migration-related changes in German society (for instance, rapid transition into a multi-ethnic society) and the short-term shock without successful crisis communication resulted in irreparable damage to Merkel's leadership, which could also be seen both at the polls and in the party's 2015 regional, and 2017 federal, election outcomes.

Migration became a long-term issue in German politics, leading to Merkel's decline of authority in party circles and CDU's electoral loss which – among other factors – contributed to painful electoral defeats. In October 2018, Merkel announced her resignation as a CDU party leader. Moreover, she decided that she will not run again for the chancellorship in 2021. Some relevant, but not particularly surprising, changes have occurred in German politics since then; Covid-19 changed the electoral interests and became a top issue in German politics. Based on the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: Politbarometer*, the most pressing issues of the electorate are Covid-19 (50%) and climate change (41%). Migration dropped from its 2018 summer peak of 61% to 10%. Additionally, the opinion regarding Merkel's performance (good or bad) has increased tremendously since then (from 54% good and 43% bad in October 2018 to 84% good and 14% bad in August 2021).⁵ Nevertheless, at the end of 2018, CDU faced uncertainty in its challenge to find a new party leader.

Merkel's 'candidate', Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, former CDU politician and businessman Friedrich Merz, and the young minister of health, Jens Spahn, were among the frontrunners to become the new party leader, and therefore the candidate for chancellor in 2021. Dostal presents a concise profile of all three candidates. The outcomes were the following: in the second round of the election at a party conference in December 2018, by a low margin (52 to 48 percent), Kramp-Karrenbauer won over Merz. To provide an answer for the question of the article, namely whether Christian Democracy can reinvent itself, the author adds a short-term and a long-term perspective. He believes that the party managed leadership change well and "[T]here can be no doubt that Kramp-Karrenbauer is the most promising choice for the CDU's

immediate future”.⁶ Since that time, it became clear that Kramp-Karrenbauer could not meet expectations, which led to the election of Armin Laschet as a CDU leader in January 2021. Dostal’s other, and probably most pressing question is whether CDU can solve (at least politically) the large-scale, long-term social changes (such as the rise of social inequality and migration) and their political consequences, such as the rise of AfD. The question was, by definition, unanswerable in 2019 and remains so in 2021, ahead of the federal elections.

Josef Hien: Unsecular Politics in a Secular Environment: The Case of Germany’s Christian Democratic Union Family Policy

Being a conscientious politician is demanding. One must meet the expectations of the electorate while preserving core moral values and norms, whatever they might be. This is one of the primary challenges of Christian democratic politicians, as they must reconcile their religious or moral confessions with day-to-day politics. In light of the social tendencies of Western states, secularization theory long suggested that this kind of politics will either secularize or cease to exist. Yet, these theories were wrong, since Christian democratic politics is thriving and still consists of Christian elements in specific cases, argues Josef Hien in his article *Unsecular Politics in a Secular Environment: The Case of Germany’s Christian Democratic Union Family Policy*, published in 2013 in the journal of *German Politics*.⁷ As the title suggests, the author analyses CDU’s family policy as an example. In the beginning, Hien reviews the basic theories and ideas of the ‘controversy’ of promoting unsecular politics in a secular environment. The solution is the balancing act of these Christian democratic parties between “the secular requirements of modernity and their religious roots.”⁸ The author wishes to add to scientific literature the idea that the political outcome of Christian democratic politics is not always dependent on the fight between secular and non-secular forces, as usually suggested, but often results from interdenominational conflicts. The German religious landscape is particularly prone to this phenomenon. One example is the clash between Catholics and Protestants on family policies in the 2000 decade, which resulted from differing views of family models.

In one of the first chapters of the article, the author collects the most important historical data about German religiosity. In West Germany, the denomination balance was 50,6% Protestant and 45% Catholic, which almost remained the same in the 1960s and 70s. From the 70s, secular tendencies strengthened, and in 1987, the secular segment reached 11,4%. Reunification contributed to this trend since in East Germany the communist regime aggressively secularized society. In 2011, 30,8% of Germans were Catholic, 30,3% were Protestant, and 38,8% were secular or non-Christian. Another measurement is regular church attendance; from 1994 to 2009, around 10 percent of former West Germans regularly attended church, while that figure was only 3 percent in former East Germany. Although these trends are clear, religion remains a crucial voting factor in Germany, Hien claimed in 2013. Regarding party preference, Catholics are closer to Christian Democrats (who altogether gain the most religious votes), though Angela Merkel began a “moderate protestantisation of the Christian Democrats since she became the party leader”⁹. Until 2005, Protestants and secular voters tended to support Social Democrats more (proportionately). The latter changed in the 2000s, with secular votes are equally distributed, while the Green Party increasingly began to represent modern Protestantism both among party elites and members.

The following chapters – which are extremely interesting – examine the influence of Catholic social teaching, often interpreted in a way that ensured a male breadwinner, on direct value orientations, including decisions on government positions and concrete policy decisions in West Germany from the 1950s to the 2000s (unified Germany). Women favored this model as well as men, which is represented by the fact that, until 1972, CDU regularly received 8-10 percent more votes from female voters than from males. Several elements (e.g. secularization, changing female attitudes and lives, as well as unification and East German “dual-earning” policies) attributed to the large cultural changes that necessitated a radical political shift of family policies in the 2000s. Yet the change has been tremendously difficult because Catholic and Protestant ideals (male breadwinner vs. dual-income/caretaker model) differed at the root. When Angela Merkel and her supporters began to stress the latter model, there promptly occurred a backlash from Catholic Christian Democrats and the Catholic Church, which even threatened to urge Catholic voters not to vote for the Christian Democrats (*Hirtenbrief*). The author summarizes the most important steps of this years-long cultural struggle

and points to the fact that, in the end, Merkel could ‘convince’ the Catholic Church through economic interest to accept the changes (in other words, von der Leyen, then the Minister of Families, threatened cuts to state funding of the Catholic Church). The political outcome was a success. CDU managed to regain the 4,8 percent of female votes that it had lost since 1972.

In summary, there are several scientific explanations for the change in CDU family policy. Some researchers call attention to secular tendencies, while others to the idea that winning the female electorate was a focus. Yet, this article claims the central conflict – contrary to what secularization theories would suggest – was not between religious and non-religious sides, but between denominations, Catholic and Protestant, who had their own religious-based conceptions of family models.

Kamil Marcinkiewicz – Ruth Dassonneville: Do religious voters support populist radical right parties? Opposite effects in Western and Eastern Europe

Investigating Germany-focused scientific literature is just one way to acquire knowledge about German politics. Another one, which could deepen understanding of the topic, examination of comparative analyses, such as Kamil Marcinkiewicz and Ruth Dassonneville’s article titled, *Do religious voters support populist right parties? Opposite effects in Western and East-Central Europe*, written in 2021.¹⁰ The authors argue that, although much has been written on the rise of populist radical right (PRR) parties, the notion of religiosity in their success received less attention. Three reasons justify the research topic: (1) several PRR parties refer to Christian tradition (in opposition to Islam) in their manifestos; (2) Christian democratic political parties integrated religious voters into the political system, but their electoral strength weakened, which obviated analysis of the behavior of religious politics; (3) the 2004 enlargement of the European Union brought nations with different political systems and different levels of religiosity in the European sphere. The variations of religiosity and party competition “has been associated with more attention for religion in debates in the European parliament”.¹¹ After reviewing the relevant scientific literature on the topic, the authors formulated three theory-based hypotheses and their core assumptions:

- (1) **Hypothesis 1:** “The more religious is an individual, the higher her likelihood of voting for a populist radical party.” This main idea is that partly in response to social changes, as many European Christian-democratic parties have moved toward a more moderate position in social-cultural questions (e.g. same-sex marriage, abortion), which could result in electoral losses among religious voters. Moreover, as emphasized, PPR parties tend to highlight traditions and the significance of Christianity, which also could attract religious voters. This “faith-based” discourse could contribute religious voters to support PPR parties.
- (2) **Hypothesis 2:** “The more religious is an individual the lower her likelihood of voting for a populist radical right party.” This hypothesis is the opposite of the former one since there are also reasons that could enforce the idea that some aspects of PPR politics, most importantly anti-immigration and nationalism, contrast with religious values like openness. One example is Pope Francis’s stance toward refugees, which might affect religious voters.
- (3) **Hypothesis 3:** “In countries with strong Christian-Democratic parties, the relationship between church attendance and a vote for the populist radical right parties is negative, while it is positive in countries where Christian-Democratic parties are very weak or non-existent.” Based on scientific literature, the authors believe that the validity of Hypothesis 1 and 2 depends highly on national contexts, but the most decisive factor is the strength of Christian Democracy in a country. They argue the following: “In countries where strong Christian-Democratic parties exist, the negative relationship between religiosity and supporting PRR parties may be observed—regardless of the level of progressiveness of religious voters. In contrast, where no strong Christian-Democratic parties compete, the effect of religiosity on voting for the populist radical right might be positive.”¹²

Based on the used methodology and data sets (such as ESS 2016), the results are the following:

- Most of the Western European PPR parties receive less support from more religious voters (religiosity is defined as the frequency of church attendance). This group includes, among others, AfD in Germany, FPÖ in Austria, FN in France, and UKIP in the United Kingdom. This validates the second hypothesis.

Moreover, in most of these cases (UKIP is an exception), there is a pattern that the more religious are less likely to support PPR parties, and there is a positive relation to vote for the Christian democratic option (like ÖVP in Austria and CDU/CSU in Germany). The authors believe these data suggest that “Christian democracy can serve as a ‘vaccine’ for voters against the populist radical right”.¹³

- In the second group, there are those PPR parties for which the authors did not find a significant correlation between church attendance and voting. In this group belong, for instance, Italian PPR parties (Italian Lega, Brothers of Italy) and the Belgian Flemish Interest.
- The third group includes East-Central European PPR parties, such as PiS and Kukiz'15 in Poland, and Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary. Here, in some cases, there has been a positive association between church attendance and voting for PPR parties, namely in the case of PiS (where it is the strongest) and Fidesz. This is not the case for the smaller parties Jobbik and Kukiz'15, for which the coefficients are negative.^a This is in line with the first hypothesis, but its reason is connected to the third hypothesis since the authors suggest the lack of strong Christian democratic presence is one of the reasons for the results (beyond the different roles of churches in Western and East-Central Europe). They stipulate that the effect of religiosity on PPR party voting is “particularly strong where a fusion of national and religious identities led to the emergence of ‘religious nationalism’”.¹⁴

After looking at the results – which seem to be well-articulated – it is worth look at a crucial distinction the authors take, which strongly affects the conclusion of the article (especially the third hypothesis) - namely, what do we consider a Christian democratic party? The authors mention Bale and Szczerbiak's article¹⁵ regarding the five essential characteristics of Christian Democratic parties.^b Even if these characteristics are taken

^a In the case of PiS the „most secular Poles vote for PiS with a probability of roughly 23%. For those declaring weekly participation in church service, the predicted support for PiS soars to 49%.” Looking at the Fidesz it is clear that “Hungarians vote for Fidesz based on respondent's declarations increases from 64% among most secular voter to 73% for weekly churchgoers.”

^b These are the following: “First, they are ‘committed to the idea of society as an organic whole.’ As a result they stress the importance of negotiations and compromise. Second, they are champions of strong families and traditional values. Third, they are moderately supportive of the market economy. Fourth, in international relations they emphasize the importance of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

for granted, without criticism or modification, it is still not clear whether the authors use it as an indicator in all cases (or even in any cases) to determine which party is Christian democratic and which is not. The question is probably most significant in the cases of Poland and Hungary. The authors suggest that Christian democratic parties are weak or nonexistent in East-Central Europe, but they formulate this argument based on Grzymala-Busse's article¹⁶ from 2013, and not on Bale and Szczerbiak's distinction. Another doubt may arise from the fact that the authors base their conclusion on Hungary on Ádám and Bozóki's findings¹⁷ published in 2016, which are insightful in many respects but do not reflect the changes of recent years, specifically the fact that, starting with Viktor Orbán's radio speech in May 2018, speaking about his future government plans,¹⁸ the government politicians continuously frame themselves and their political actions as the manifestations of Christian democracy.¹⁹ In my point of view, it should not be taken for granted that this is merely a communication tool or simple rhetoric. On the other hand, an analysis of the correlation between Christian democratic values and policy is worth serious study. Such ambition is lacking in the article. The concern, in other words, is that one could argue, on scientific grounds, that Fidesz or PiS more closely resemble PRR parties than Christian Democratic ones, yet the analysis should be based on well-defined, set categories such as Bale and Szczerbiak's characteristics and the latest relevant political changes also merit consideration.

Finally, one should note that, though they express it with hyphens, the authors directly refer to a crucial notion when they write, "...the (near) absence of Christian-Democratic parties—in the Western meaning of this concept—in most East-Central European countries...". The focus should be on the "Western meaning of this concept", partly since the authors probably well understand that East-Central European countries, especially Hungary and Poland do not subscribe perfectly to the West European form of Christian democracy – there might be national/regional differences. Yet this reference begs the question of whether there is only a Western meaning of this concept, or whether a non-Western, (such as an East-Central European version of Christian democracy) also exists. This question deserves significant scientific study.

Finally, their program is rooted in Christian ethics, but they are not simply controlled or operated by the Church hierarchy."

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