

The Curse of Consensus Democracy: Can Angela Merkel Reform Germany?

Christian Tuschhoff

Regardless of what coalition government will emerge after the election on September 18, 2005 Angela Merkel will become the next Chancellor of Germany. Once elected she will face two interrelated challenges. First, she needs to lead the economy back to a path of stable and long-term economic growth and employment. Second, she needs to adapt the German welfare state - the so-called social market economy - in order to cope with the reality of an aging society. While she deserves every chance any fresh leader should be awarded I doubt whether she is able to overcome the fundamental curse of the German consensus democracy that caused the stalling of necessary reforms (*Reformstau*) in the first place. Public opinion surveys already indicate the low confidence of voters that a new government can actually make a difference. The public's trust in the competence of parties and politics in general is extremely low.¹

In order to assess Merkel's capability to reform the country it is *less* important to analyze *what* she intends to do as to understand *how* she plans building political support for her reform agenda. A number of factors will determine her chance for success.

First, how strong of a mandate will she receive from the voters? According to surveys Merkel is more a liability to the Christian Democratic Parties (CDU-CSU)

than an asset because support for the parties is consistently over 40 percent whereas only some 30 percent would vote for her as the chancellor in direct elections. Such a lack of public approval will restrict Merkel's ability to mobilize the public against opposition in Parliament and within her own party.

Second, how strong is Merkel as a leader of the CDU-CSU? Her power base in the party is limited and confined to the higher levels of the CDU's organizational structure. Merkel has not yet succeeded in developing the equivalent to the so-called "Kohl system". Former chancellor Helmut Kohl was able to count on the support by most local party leaders with whom he kept very close personal relations. Counting on such a high number of "troops" as he used to call them was the single most important factor of his stay in government over 16 years. Angela Merkel cannot count on a similar loyalty and sustained support and is therefore a much weaker party leader.

Third, she faces skepticism if not even outright opposition from independent regional party leaders many of whom are also *Ministerpräsidenten* (Governors) in German states (*Länder*). Recent research has shown: whereas in the past *Ministerpräsidenten's* loyalty to their party prevailed over their state's interest that relationship has been reversed. Today, state interests prevail over party loyalty.²

¹ Köcher, Renate. 2005. Entscheidung voller Unbehagen. Der Wahlkampf verschärft die Vertrauenskrise der Politik. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17. August 2005, 5.

² This finding is one of the results of a research project on *Federalism and*

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Fourth, this means that despite a strong majority of CDU-led states in the Federal Council (the upper house of Germany's parliamentary system) support for Angela Merkel's agenda is not automatic or assured.

In short, Merkel will have to negotiate every item on her political agenda with a significant number of potential veto players. Entrenched veto players rather than majority rule characterize Germany's consensus democracy. These veto players include:

- ◆ a coalition party that the election will determine,
- ◆ the typically self-confident sister party CSU under the leadership of Edmund Stoiber, *Ministerpräsident* of Bavaria,
- ◆ other regional party leaders in states with high population and/or strong support for the CDU such as Baden-Württemberg, Hesse, or Northrhine-Westphalia,
- ◆ the majority of CDU-led states in the federal Council,
- ◆ different factions within the CDU-CSU parliamentary party.

Angela Merkel has to act more like a mediator and manager than a leader because of restricted public and party support. As the election platform of the CDU-CSU already indicates she will choose to negotiate compromises rather than confront her opponents and challengers. She will choose to bargain rather than using the constitutional competence of setting guidelines (*Richtlinienkompetenz*) of the Chancellor.

The likely consequences of Angela Merkel's limited political power and leadership skills are incremental rather than fundamental reforms. Policy in Germany is bound for small rather than radical change.

To be sure Gerhard Schröder faced similar problems and his lack of success as chancellor and party leader resulted from the same defects of the German political system. To overcome these obstacles of the consensus democracy he chose to employ expert commissions on his series of reforms trying to reduce the power of veto players by moving crucial decisions out of the parliamentary process and build a political consensus prior to decisions of formal constitutional bodies. However, this government by expert commission reduced participation and representation of political parties and their ability to engage the broader public. It has caused the public's disenchantment with politics and reduced the basis of the SPD vote by 10 to 15 percent.

Learning from Schröder's failure Merkel is likely to use the classic model of governing by parliamentary democracy instead of expert commission. However, she is not likely to escape the trap of Germany's consensus democracy. This system produces either gridlock or extremely complicated laws that hardly change the economic, political and social status quo. As a result the public's low expectations for reforms are the most realistic scenario for Germany under a Merkel government.

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Christian Tuschhoff is a Visiting Associate Professor in the Political Science Department of Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Please send comments to ctuschh@emory.edu