

# The CDU/CSU's election victory is in stark contrast to the experiences of other Christian Democratic parties across Europe.

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23/09/2013

*On Sunday, Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU won 41.5 per cent of the vote in Germany's federal election, falling just short of an absolute majority of seats in the Bundestag. **Tim Bale** and **André Krouwel** note that the success of Germany's Christian Democrats is at odds with their sister parties across Western Europe. The strength of Merkel's leadership, and the fact that the CDU/CSU have not faced strong competition from right-wing populist parties, might offer a partial explanation for this success.*



Yes, some of the commentary has been over the top. Angela Merkel, after all, had the economy on her side and was facing a poorly-led opposition. And hers is in some ways a Pyrrhic victory, the elimination of the FDP from the Bundestag practically forcing her into a Grand Coalition. Nevertheless, the CDU/CSU's 41.5 per cent share of the vote at the German general election was extraordinary. And it was all the more extraordinary still when one considers the contrast between its stellar performance and that of its moribund sister parties across Western Europe.



In the decade immediately following the Second World War, the major Christian Democratic parties in Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria all had vote shares above 40 per cent. Now, six decades later, the only Christian Democratic party in those countries surpassing the 30 per cent level is the German CDU/CSU. For now at least, and for the foreseeable future, Angela Merkel's party – strictly speaking, combination of parties since it is an alliance between a state-wide party and its autonomous Bavarian ally – is still the dominant political force on the right in the German political landscape. In other countries this is no longer the case.

In the Netherlands, the CDA is now the fifth largest party and two right-wing competitors – the liberal VVD and the populist anti-immigrant PVV – both have larger vote shares. In Italy, the once dominant position of the DC on the right has, following its collapse, been taken over by regionalist parties such as Lega Nord, Berlusconi's political formations and assorted technocrats. In Belgium, the Christian Democrats have fierce competition from both the populist separatists (NVA) and the liberal VLD. In Austria the ÖVP still competes with the social-democratic SPÖ, but is forced to look over its shoulder continually at populist radical right parties like the FPÖ and the BZÖ, and we shall see how it fares at next week's [general election](#).



CDU election poster, Credit: m.p.3 (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Christian Democrats in Germany face many of the same exogenous and endogenous challenges as their counterparts in other countries. These include, most obviously, secularisation, the disappearance of their communist antithesis, the attractions – dubious or otherwise – of market

liberalism, increasing concerns about both the European project and migration/multiculturalism potentially giving rise to challenges from populist parties and, of course, party system fragmentation. Yet they seem to have been less affected at the ballot box. How and why, then, have Germany's Christian Democrats fared better than their counterparts in other European countries?

### **The CDU/CSU: First among Unequals**

For one thing, the CDU/CSU has managed to hold on to more of its working class electorate than its counterparts in other countries. Even in the late 1990s, one-third of working class voters supported the CDU/CSU. The CDU and the CSU can still claim – just – to be broad *Volksparteien*. It also seems to have held on to more of that dwindling band of voters who would describe themselves as identifying strongly with one party or another.

For another, the CDU/CSU has lost fewer members – in part perhaps because it had, compared to its sister parties, fewer to lose. Moreover, it appears to have suffered a significantly smaller decline in membership over the last thirty years than both the SPD and the FDP. And the proportion of funds raised from membership fees has actually risen over time. Meanwhile the amount of income accounted for by state subventions has stayed around the same level. Given Germany's relative size, this clearly puts the CDU/CSU at a huge organisational advantage compared to Christian Democratic parties in other countries.

Then there is its ideological flexibility. Much has been made of Angela Merkel's magpie tendencies – her willingness to move towards her opponents' positions and even to adopt them wholesale. But for the CDU/CSU this really is par for the course. Although generally a little more right-wing than many of its counterparts (think centre-right rather than centrist) the CDU/CSU – partly because of the demands of governing in coalition with social democrats or liberals – has always veered more between the left and right (albeit the left and right of the right of the political spectrum) than most of its counterparts.

It is of course possible to argue that the CDU/CSU's relative success is mainly down to luck rather than judgment. Germany, for instance, has suffered less of a decline in religious observance – a variable often linked to Christian Democratic difficulties – than other countries.

It also seems unlikely that the CDU/CSU's relative success has had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that, unlike its sister parties, it has not faced serious competition from the populist radical right. Whether, on the other hand, this is wholly explained by a combination of a high electoral threshold and an overwhelming historical legacy rather than a successful counter-strategy on the part of CDU/CSU politicians is a moot point.

Likewise, there is also some, albeit limited, evidence that the German Christian Democrats continue to benefit from the fact that they were in power when the Berlin Wall collapsed and the Federal Republic was reunified. On the other hand, one can argue that the latter might not have occurred – or at least occurred so rapidly – had it not been for the efforts of CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

This brings us, finally, to the question of leadership. It may well be that the CDU/CSU has simply been better led – and better organised – than its Christian Democratic counterparts in other countries. Certainly, the CDU has been able to count on a series of leaders able to combine ideological flexibility and a talent for organisation as well as strategic adaptation, all of which helps to account for the party's impressive ability to adapt.

Quite why so many Christian Democratic leaders in Austria, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands lacked (and continue to lack) the skills of Messrs Adenauer, Erhard, Kohl and, of course, Mrs Merkel herself, is a trickier question and one which we hope academics and journalists will answer in due course.

*This article is based on the authors' recent contribution to [German Politics](#)*

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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## About the author

**Tim Bale** – Queen Mary, University of London

[Tim Bale](#) is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London. His latest book is *European Politics: a Comparative Introduction* (Palgrave, 2013).

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**André Krouwel** – Free University (VU) in Amsterdam

[André Krouwel](#) is associate professor at the Department of Political Science at the Free University (VU) in Amsterdam and is Academic Director of Kieskompas (Vote Compass). His latest book is *Party Transformations in European Democracies* (SUNY Press, 2012).

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