

The CSU: Bavaria's seemingly eternal governing party will win again in September

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Germany will hold federal elections on 22 September. As part of EUROPP's coverage of the elections, [Amir Abedi](#) writes on Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU), which will also be competing in state elections on 15 September. Despite being in government in Bavaria almost continuously since the end of the Second World War, the CSU experienced a drop in support in the last state elections in 2008. However current opinion polls show that the party is well placed to once again gain single party control of Bavaria's state parliament, and a resurgent CSU could well play a major role in helping to swing the federal elections in favour of Angela Merkel and the CDU/CSU.



Most commentators have been focusing on the electoral fate of the classically liberal Free Democrats (FDP) when assessing German Chancellor Angela Merkel's chances of continuing in office with her current coalition partners after September 22nd. However, the fate of her current coalition will also depend to a significant degree on the ability of the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), to improve on its uncharacteristically weak showing in the last Bundestag election. Its 2009 vote share of 42.5 per cent was the lowest the CSU had attained in Bavaria since 1949.

A first indication of the CSU's strength will be the outcome of the state (*Land*) election in Bavaria, which will take place on September 15th, that is, a week before the federal poll. In that *Landtag* election voters will decide whether one of the world's most successful political parties will continue to lead the state government for another five years. Since 1957 the CSU has led all Bavarian administrations, forming single-party majority governments from 1962 to 2008. In 2003, the party even managed to obtain a two thirds majority in the *Landtag* (winning 60.7 per cent of the votes).

Over the last few years, though, it has looked as if the CSU's long hold on power might be coming to an end. Mainly due to fiscal austerity policies and several other unpopular decisions, its support dropped to 43.4 per cent in the last *Land* election, which meant that for the first time in forty-six years it had to enter into a coalition.

It is too early to write the CSU's obituary, though. [Recent polls](#) indicate that the party is on track to once again win a majority of seats. How did the CSU manage to become so dominant in Bavaria? I (along with my co-author Steffen Schneider) have tried to [identify](#) possible reasons for the establishment of single-party dominance in subnational jurisdictions. Many of the factors we identified are very much in evidence in the case of the CSU.

The CSU's dominance in Bavaria

First, critical historical junctures are important in that they open up windows of opportunity for strategic maneuvering. For example, the fact that the CSU emerged after World War II as a successor to the Catholic Bavarian People's Party, which had been the strongest party in the state during the years of the Weimar Republic, gave it a head start.



Horst Seehofer, Chairman of the CSU (Credit: Henning Schlottmann, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The social cleavage structure of a jurisdiction can also be very important. Bavaria, as a traditional stronghold of Catholicism, provided the CSU with a particularly good base for its march to dominance, as did the still largely rural character of the *Land* and the comparatively low share of unionised blue-collar workers in its underdeveloped manufacturing sector. The party also captured much of the vote of newly arrived ethnic German refugees. Thus the mere fact that the socio-economic and socio-cultural structures in Bavaria were heavily skewed in its favor ensured a prominent role for the newly created CSU, which emerged as the strongest party in the first postwar election and has been excluded from government only once (1954-57) since then.

Another important reason for its dominance is the fact that the CSU, while aligned with the CDU at the federal level, is formally independent. This allowed the party to effectively portray itself as the partisan expression of Bavarian identity and the voice of state interests. Unlike the other major parties, it was not just a regional branch of one of the federal parties. With its long historical tradition and cultural peculiarities, Bavaria is indeed unique among the German *Länder*, some of which are entirely artificial postwar creations. While the CSU was not without competitors in its effort to become Bavaria's voice, the identification of the *Land* with the party is now stronger than ever.

The CSU has also gained much leverage from playing a kind of two-level game as both a national and a regional party, especially when it is a member of the federal government: using its influence in the national capital to secure concessions for Bavaria and at the same time portraying itself as an 'unofficial' opposition back home when the government is unpopular. Whenever the SPD was in power at the federal level, the CSU could fully capitalise on its self-proclaimed role as the vanguard of social conservatism and the true representative of Bavarian interests.

Being in power for a significant period of time provided the CSU with another advantage, namely having exclusive access to the resources of the state. These resources could notably be used for patronage and for the maintenance of clientelistic networks. Control over instruments of political socialisation and the policy agenda was also crucial for the party's attempts to defend its dominance. However, the CSU maintained itself in power not just through patronage (infiltrating/dominating the state bureaucracy and through its influence over the once sizeable state controlled sector of the economy) but also through competent economic management. The exceptional performance of Bavaria's economy compared to that of the other states has also for the most part helped to shield the CSU from voter anger as opposition parties have so far failed to take advantage of numerous scandals over nepotism and political patronage in awarding *Land* jobs.

Since 1945 the predominantly agrarian society of Bavaria has been developed into an economic powerhouse. The state has never had to deal with the decline and restructuring of old industries and is now among the most prosperous jurisdictions in Germany. The development of high-tech growth industries and advanced services was supported by the CSU's ambitious and interventionist strategy of economic modernisation whose success, in turn, enabled the government to fund programmes for the less fortunate areas and population segments of Bavaria.

The CSU, which has a labour wing, has played a crucial role in the postwar expansion of the welfare state, and has never fully bought into the neo-liberal agenda even though fiscal responsibility is the mantra of the current government. The combination of a very pronounced social conservatism and traditionalism with an ongoing commitment to welfare programmes, economic and technological development has been key to the CSU's electoral success. This success has even extended beyond its traditional core base of Catholic and rural voters, farmers and small business owners – for instance, among public servants, Catholic and non-unionised workers. The CSU's aptness at compensating socio-economic and demographic change is thus remarkable.

The weakness of the opposition is another important reason for the party's dominance. The CSU started out as the largest formation in the multi-party system of the postwar years. And while the fragmentation of the opposition at that time undoubtedly facilitated the task of securing its early dominance, the CSU also engaged in the marginalisation of the separatist Bavarian Party, the only competitor that credibly vied for the coveted role as the chief representative of Bavarian culture and interests in the Federal Republic.

Since 1962, when the CSU regained a majority of seats, it has not faced a viable competitor. The SPD – long caught

in a 'thirty-per cent tower' – has seen its electoral support dwindle even further recently (down to less than 20 per cent of the votes in the last election). Even the selection of Munich's long-serving and popular mayor, Christian Ude, as its leading candidate will, according to the latest polls, not help the party do much better in the upcoming contest.

The CSU and the 2013 elections

Whether the CSU will be able to regain a majority of seats in the Bavarian *Landtag* will depend to a large extent on the performance of the smaller parties. Particular attention should be paid to the FDP, the CSU's current coalition partner, which had failed to cross the five-per cent threshold three times in a row before the last election, and the non-partisan, centrist, and populist Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*), a group that has made its name in local politics and managed to attract a sizeable number of former CSU voters.

If the FDP succeeds in overcoming the 5 per cent threshold and the Free Voters repeat their strong showing from 2008, when they polled over 10 per cent of the votes, the CSU will only have a small chance of regaining single-party majority status as the Greens are poised to improve on their showing in the last *Landtag* election (9.4 per cent). However, if the CSU, which is predicted to gain about four percentage points on September 15th, does end up forming another single-party majority government, it will be viewed as a major success. Moreover, if the Christian Democrats do well federally and win a combined 40 per cent or more of the votes on September 22nd it will in no small part be due to a resurgent CSU.

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