

Chancellor Angela Merkel — A Sign of Hope or the Exception That Proves the Rule?

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X08000391

Recently there has been an extraordinary increase in female political leaders across the globe. In addition to Chile, Finland, Germany and Liberia — considered in this issue — Ukraine, Argentina, India, and several other countries have recently inaugurated their first female executives. A closer examination, however, reveals that female executives are not exactly poised to take over the world. Most of the new female executives are not running geopolitically powerful countries. In that sense, Angela Merkel is not a typical exemplar of the new female executive. Merkel is the only woman leading a Group of Eight (G8) country. She is also the only female head of state in NATO and the only female head of state in the European Union.

Merkel stands out in the recent spate of women heads of state because most of them have come to power in countries with fragmented executives. The power of the executive position varies by political system. Alan Siaroff (2003) and Farida Jalalzai (2008) both categorize political systems according to the relative power of the executive position. For example, a directly elected president is more powerful than a prime minister who is answerable to the legislature. Mixed systems may have both a president and a prime minister, with one position holding the upper hand. Jalalzai (2008) finds that women are more likely to be elected prime minister than president and that they are more likely to be in the weaker executive position in a mixed system. Generally speaking, there is a tendency for the new wave of female executives to be constrained in their power.

Although Germany does have a split executive with both a president and a chancellor, Merkel holds the unquestionably more powerful post. The German president, as head of state, is almost purely ceremonial. To be sure, the chancellorship is not on a par with the American presidency. Nor is the German chancellor as powerful as the British prime minister, at least from an institutional perspective. In a system with as many veto points as Germany's, the chancellor's powers are constrained, not just by the parliament but by the Federal Constitutional Court and by the federal states or *Länder* (Tsebelis 1995).

All the same, “weak” is hardly an apt descriptor for this office. The chancellor must answer to the *Bundestag* (parliament), but the policy of the constructive vote of no confidence means that the chancellor cannot be voted out of office unless the members of the Bundestag can agree on a replacement ahead of time. That procedure significantly enhances the power of the chancellor. Some scholars refer to Germany as a “chancellor democracy” because the chancellorship is such a powerful office (NiCLAUSS 2004).

These insights lead us to consider the importance of Merkel beyond the German case. Is she a sign of hope that female politicians are beginning to gain access to the highest offices even in the world’s most powerful countries? Until now, female executives have been more common in the developing than in the developed world. While it is initially surprising, it may be that developing countries sometimes help, rather than hinder, women’s advancement to high political office. Perhaps the importance of kinship ties and the prevalence of unstable political contexts in the developing world can explain why this might happen (Hodson 1997, 34, 45). As women take on the executive office in these apparently less welcoming countries, the trend may spread to places with more egalitarian views on gender. Merkel’s success might be a sign that female executive leadership is becoming more common throughout the world.

On the other hand, Merkel’s rise to power might have little to do with the success of female executives elsewhere. In that case, Merkel is not so much a sign of hope as the exception that proves the rule: a powerful female leader of a powerful country who illustrates how far women still have to go in gaining access to power. So the question is: How did Merkel ascend to power and how generalizable are the circumstances of her success?

I argue that three factors were responsible for Merkel’s success: first, an increased pressure for gender equity in politics; second, political disruptions in the form of both German unification and a major campaign-finance scandal within her political party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU); and third, organizational structures within the CDU that contributed to her rise through the ranks. As I have argued elsewhere, Merkel’s own capabilities as a politician certainly also played a role (Wiliarty 2008), but if we are interested in generalizability, then we must focus on factors not related to the politician herself. Furthermore, it is safe to assume that most countries could come up with competent, even outstanding, female politicians — the question is whether these politicians would have a chance to come to power within their particular political system.

Gender Equity Context

The pressure for gender equity, arising primarily from the women's movement, has significantly shifted the parameters of German politics in recent decades. The German women's movement changed the political context by changing society's expectations about the normalcy of female politicians (Ferree 2006). By the time Merkel was running for chancellor in 2005, female politicians were still less common than male politicians. At that time, Germany was ranked thirteenth globally in terms of the percentage of female parliamentarians, with 32.6% women in the Bundestag (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005). The idea of a woman chancellor was much less outrageous than it would have been in the mid-1980s. The women's movement can also be credited with the cultivation of "women's interests" and the idea that it might actually be an asset to have a female candidate (von Wahl 2006).

Political culture can also affect women's chances of succeeding politically (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Paxton and Kunovich 2003). Germany is a country with a favorable culture for female politicians. It is an affluent, postindustrial society with egalitarian values. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris's Gender Equality Scale ranks Germany as one of the top three countries in the world for egalitarian values (2003, 33). While cultural barriers to a female executive probably exist to some extent in every society, these barriers are relatively low in Germany.

Germany's political institutions are also relatively favorable to female politicians. With 31.6% women, the German Bundestag currently ranks seventeenth in the world in terms of the percentage of female parliamentarians (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2008). The World Economic Forum (2008) ranks Germany seventh overall in terms of gender equity and sixth in terms of political empowerment. Germany has a mixed electoral system in which half the seats are won through proportional representation and half through a winner-take-all system of single-member districts (Farrell 2001). A significant body of scholarship has shown that proportional representation is more beneficial to female candidates (Caul 1999; Duverger 1955; Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Paxton 1997; Reynolds 1999; Rule 1981; Rule and Zimmerman 1994). In mixed systems women are generally elected at much higher rates under the proportional representation component of the system (Norris 1993; Rule 1987). This is true in Germany as well (Hoecker 1998, 86; Kittilson 2006, 4).

Most of Germany's political parties have also implemented gender quotas, which have been shown to be one of the best mechanisms for

getting more women into office (Caul 1999, 2001; Dahlerup 1998, 2006; Kittilson 2006; Reynolds 1999; Tripp and Kang 2008). The first quotas in (West) Germany were introduced by the Green Party in 1986, with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) following suit in 1988 and the CDU introducing a quota in 1996 (Kolinsky 1991, 1993a; McKay 2004).¹ Critically, even the CDU, the major party of the Right, adopted a gender quota in 1996. In terms of institutional context, Germany provides a very favorable environment for female politicians.²

Embedded as it is in a context of gender equity, Merkel's rise to power can be seen as a sign of hope. While regression remains a possibility, in general, these positive contextual factors are spreading. The modernization process described by Inglehart and Norris (2003) is present in increasingly more countries. Institutions such as gender quotas are dramatically on the rise. The women's movement has left an important legacy across the world in terms of changed expectations and changed political interests (Ferree 2006). We are still seeing the repercussions of these changes — Merkel's chancellorship not least of all — and we can and should expect more female executives as these changes spread throughout the world.

Unusual Times

Previous scholarship has found that women leaders are more likely to come to power during times of instability or "unusual times" (Genovese 1993; Jalalzai 2008; Hodson 1997). Merkel's rise to power confirms the importance of this variable. Her ascendancy to the chancellorship was aided both by German unification and by the major campaign finance scandal that disrupted the internal life of the CDU, circumstances that minimize the generalizability of her particular case. To the extent that she owes her success to idiosyncratic upheavals, we need to be circumspect in interpreting Merkel as a sign of improved times.

1. This is not to argue that gender quotas create a completely equitable context. As Eva Kolinsky (1993b) and Joanna McKay (2007) both point out, at least in Germany both the preconditions necessary for running for parliament and the culture of parliamentary life tend to work against female politicians, even in a political system with quotas.

2. In terms of parliamentary representation, in the 1980s women were better represented in the East German *Volkskammer* (parliament) than they were in the West German Bundestag. However, the *Volkskammer* was an essentially powerless body; there were no women in the East German Politburo, where actual decision making occurred. Postunification, then, women were less well represented than they had been in East Germany, but female parliamentarians arguably had more real power. Female representation in the Bundestag has increased significantly since 1990.

Eighteen years after unification, the aftershocks are still being felt in German politics. The merger of the two Germanys increased the population of the West by almost 17 million people. Furthermore, these new voters had different life histories, different values, and different political preferences than their compatriots in the West (Holzhacker 1999). The Christian Democrats, as the party most in favor of unification, did extremely well with eastern voters in the initial election after unification. After the initial unification bonus, it became more difficult for the CDU to campaign successfully in the East. The difference in the CDU/CSU's (Christian Social Union's) national election results between the East and the West increased from 3.5% in 1994 to 12.2% in 2005. The East–West difference for the SPD was only 4.7% in 2005 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2005; Pulzer 2003, 164). As an historically Catholic party, the CDU has struggled to win support in a region of the country that is now largely atheist. The CDU's hard-core anticommunist stance also did not play well because it did not square with easterners' personal experience with communism as something not entirely negative (Green 1999, 308). Nor did the Christian Democrats' support for the free market prove to be a winning strategy in the East. The introduction of the market left many eastern workers unemployed and many eastern companies bankrupt.

How did these unusual times help Merkel come to power? Obviously, without unification Merkel would still be working as a chemist in East Germany. Beyond that point, however, the importance and difficulty of appealing to voters in the East has led both major parties to promote eastern politicians. One reason for this is legitimacy. It would be difficult to justify a purely western government. Merkel frequently benefited from her status as an easterner when new positions became available.

Furthermore, winning votes in eastern Germany is difficult. The ongoing success of the Party of Democratic Socialism and its successor, Labour and Social Justice—the electoral alternative, reveals that the major parties have not yet hit upon a message that really appeals to eastern voters. Yet, the eastern Länder are much too populous to write off. With Merkel at the helm, the CDU could hope both that easterners might vote for one of their own and that Merkel might better understand how to run a campaign that would succeed in the eastern states.

Merkel also benefited from the unusual times within her political party, the CDU, which had been chaired by Helmut Kohl since 1973. When the party lost the elections in 1998 largely because of dissatisfaction with Kohl, he finally stepped down. His departure following the electoral defeat led to

a leadership overhaul within the party. The new chair of the party, Wolfgang Schäuble, appointed Merkel as his general secretary. She had been a cabinet member for eight years under Kohl, but the position of general secretary was a clear promotion in terms of both prestige and power.

The 1998 elections were only the beginning of internal party turmoil for the CDU. In the fall of 1999, a major campaign finance scandal broke. It was discovered that Kohl had accepted millions of deutschmarks illegally. Because many in the CDU appeared to have known about the illegal money, a series of resignations followed, including Schäuble's. For the second time in less than two years, the CDU underwent a change of leadership. Merkel became the party chair.

Finally, the decision to have Merkel run as the Christian Democratic chancellor candidate in 2005 was also the product of unusual times. The governing chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, used an unprecedented method to call early elections, giving the Christian Democrats insufficient time to find an alternative candidate.³ One could read much of Merkel's career as a series of crises and coincidences exploited by a skilled politician (Thompson and Lennartz 2006).

Unusual times create political openings. These opportunities do not benefit women exclusively, but they may be one of the few ways by which women can advance. As political outsiders, women are arguably more in need of political openings than men. This might be another reason why women do better in the developing world. Political disruptions that can bring a woman to power may be more common in less developed countries.

Unusual times certainly played a role in Merkel's rise to the chancellorship. From unification itself to Schröder's early calling of elections, Merkel's advance has been facilitated by good fortune, or by being in the right place at the right time. If political disruption is necessary to produce a female executive, we may have to wait a long time before we see another female head of government within the G8. To the extent that these events are responsible for her advance, we cannot regard Merkel as an unequivocal indication of things to come.

3. The CDU has a sister party, the CSU. The two parties are active in separate regions of Germany, but they share in the choice of a chancellor candidate. In 2002, the sister parties chose Edmund Stoiber, chair of the CSU. Having lost to Schröder in 2002, however, Stoiber had to yield to Merkel in 2005.

Internal Party Structure

Scholarship on female executives needs to include an analysis of the female leader's relationship to her political party. This may be particularly true for female executives from more powerful countries. It is interesting to note, for example, that all three female heads of government in the G8 (Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Kim Campbell of Canada, and Angela Merkel of Germany) are from center-right political parties. This is surprising given the clear tendency of parties of the Left to elect more women to parliament and to be more likely to adopt gender quotas (Caul 1999, 2001; Kittilson 2006; Matland 1993). Is it a coincidence that these three executives are from conservative parties, or is there something about conservative parties that makes it easier for them to accept female leadership?

Certainly, the internal structure of the CDU has played a critical role in Merkel's success. The CDU is considered a catch-all party (Kirchheimer 1966), but as I point out elsewhere, it is more specifically a corporatist catch-all party (Wiliarty 2002, 2008). A catch-all party, generally speaking, appeals to many sections of the electorate. In order to do so, catch-all parties offer fairly bland policy commitments so as not to offend any special-interest constituencies. They also disempower their memberships so that members with conflicting interests do not wreak havoc within the party (Kirchheimer 1966).

A corporatist catch-all party solves the dilemma of appealing to diverse constituencies in a different way. Important societal interests are recognized and organized in internal party groups. These groups are represented in internal policymaking arenas within the party, where they have an official say in framing party policy. Party policymaking is then largely a product of bargaining among represented groups. Corporatist catch-all parties do not need to disempower their memberships. Indeed, leaders of particular internal subgroups may try to expand and empower the membership of their particular group (Wiliarty 2002).

Merkel's success owes much to the CDU's organization as a corporatist catch-all party. One of the implications of this type of structure is that it benefits internal party minorities — provided that these minorities are recognized groups. Merkel is a member of two officially recognized groups, women and Protestants, who in this historically Catholic party have a special status. She is also a member of an unofficially recognized group, easterners. Therefore, she was much in demand whenever decision-making bodies within the CDU were being constituted.

This dynamic greatly facilitated Merkel's climb up the party ladder. Her first high office in unified Germany was as minister for women and youth in Kohl's first all-German cabinet. At the time she was appointed, much was made of her triple quota status as someone from East Germany, a woman, and a Protestant (Schley 2005, 32). In the immediate postunification period, there was significant pressure to promote easterners, but many potentially qualified people were tainted by an affiliation with either the Communist Party or the *Stasi*, the East German secret police. Kohl also felt pressure to have women in his cabinet and, indeed, wanted eastern women in particular. Merkel fit the bill. A similar dynamic was at work when she advanced to the position of general secretary and later when she became party chair. The choice of Merkel satisfied calls from the CDU's women's association and from party activists in the East to have one of their own in the leadership team (Wiliarty 2008).

As noted, the unusual circumstances surrounding the 2005 election contributed to Merkel's being chosen as the Christian Democratic chancellor candidate. Still, the chairs of the CDU and the CSU are the presumptive potential candidates. Merkel would never have been considered a chancellor candidate had she not been chair of the CDU, and she would not have become chair of the CDU but for the party's internal structure. She was in the right place when the right time arrived only because the CDU's organization had encouraged her progress.

The internal organization of Merkel's political party was a key factor in her rise to power. As a corporatist catch-all party, the CDU has a strong tendency to promote people who represent internal groups, particularly people who represent multiple groups. This practice is not necessarily "democratic" in the sense of having internal democracy within the political party. In order to get the desired representation of internal groups, politicians may be appointed to leadership bodies.

The corporatist catch-all party structure may be more commonly found in parties of the Right. At least in the CDU, the origins of this organizational form are to be found partially in the party's roots in social Catholicism and its attendant associations (Wiliarty 2002). If this legacy is repeated elsewhere, we might expect other Christian Democratic parties to have adopted the corporatist catch-all party structure, as indeed is the case in Austria, for example. Furthermore, a corporatist catch-all party organization might be more attractive to parties on the Right in general because these parties tend to be less concerned with internal democracy than are parties on the Left. This type of organization can help bring women up the party ranks, especially women who are members of some additional minority

group. Just as proportional representation is more beneficial to women, it may be that particular forms of internal party organization are more beneficial to women. This question warrants further attention.⁴ If the hypothesis is correct, then the importance of party organization should be seen as a sign of hope, at least for women on the Right.

Conclusions

Of course, reality is more complicated than Merkel's being simply a sign of hope or the exception that proves the rule. The gender-equity context was critical for her rise to power. The legacy of the women's movement is both changing culture and changing political institutions. Female politicians have become more common. Women's interests, however defined, have become something that parties want to claim to be able to represent. This is the background against which Merkel's career is playing out.

Tumultuous times were also important to Merkel's advance, however. Without German unification, Merkel personally could never have come to power. As an easterner, she was a political outsider. This status turned out to be beneficial both in terms of earning her (or someone like her) the "right" to be represented within the CDU hierarchy and in terms of her being clearly outside the CDU's finance scandal. Furthermore, the end of the Kohl era marked unusual times for the CDU and created political opportunities that Merkel was poised to exploit. We cannot underestimate the importance of unusual times in creating political opportunities that seem to be more critical for women's gain in political power than they are for men's. By definition, unusual times must be seen as exceptional, and exceptions of this sort probably occur less frequently in powerful industrialized democracies.

The third factor considered here is party organization. The CDU's internal structure helped Merkel advance up the party hierarchy *because* she was female (and eastern and Protestant). The mandates of the party's organization meant that she was in the right place when the exceptional times occurred. Not all parties are organized in this fashion. To the extent that the office of party leader is considered an executive office and therefore typically masculine (Duerst-Lahti 1997), women may be less likely to achieve this office in parties that elect their leadership. That is, it may not be a coincidence that Thatcher, Campbell and Merkel all

4. For more on how party organization affects women's place within the party, see Leslie and Wiliarty (2008).

come from parties of the Right. Instead, we should expect future female world leaders also to come from parties of the Right because their party organizations are more likely to promote them to positions from which they are eligible to run for the highest office of the land.

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Electoral Reform Opens Roads to Presidency for Finnish Women

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X08000408

Introduction

Imagine a U.S. presidential election where four of the five leading candidates are women and a woman (naturally!) wins. Then, imagine that the new president is a leftist and Social Democrat, a single mom, unmarried with a partner, former head of a leading gay and lesbian rights organization, lives in a modest apartment in a working class section of the capital and splurges on one extra dress for the presidential campaign, refusing any packaging or makeovers. Sound far fetched? As impossible as it might be in the United States, it became reality [in] Finland, where just such a person, Tarja Halonen, was elected the country's first female president on 6 February [2000]. (Tripp 2000, 20)

This is how political scientist Aili Mari Tripp poignantly highlighted some of the differences between Finnish and U.S. presidential campaigns in an essay on the 2000 presidential elections in Finland. Eight years later, there would be plenty of additional oddities to report, for example, how President Tarja Halonen acquired and happily embraced a new image as a Conan O'Brien look-alike (surely every woman's dream!) and the subsequent meeting between both red-haired personae in her residence during her second-term presidential campaign. On a more serious note, however, the basics of the greater narrative of politics remain the same: That is,