

Angela Merkel: Pale, Post-Heroic, Powerful

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Angela Merkel was the first female German chancellor and has been dominating the Forbes (n.d.) list of Most Powerful Women since 2006, replacing Condoleeza Rice. This study investigates Angela Merkel's leadership style in different, relevant contexts.

Rise to Power and Leading a Political Party

In Germany's proportional system, Angela Merkel's power is rooted within her political party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Angela Merkel, a protestant doctor in physics, served as a Minister in the cabinet of Helmut Kohl. Kohl, confrontational and uncompromising, provided for Merkel within the CDU (Korte, 1998). After CDU had to yield power to the left-wing opposition, Merkel subsequently became the party's Secretary-General, party leader, and opposition leader within the Schröder government. As parties determine the candidates on their election lists, Merkel first had to secure support within her party (cf. Sheeler & Anderson, 2014).

Navigating the hierarchy of a conservative party requires a transactional approach based in formal authority and identity politics, promoting trait-based approaches to leadership (Maruyama, 1980). As a protestant woman, although being a political pioneer, loyalty, decisiveness, and intelligence were chief enablers within her mainly catholic, male-dominated party. Merkel rose to power in a sustainer relationship within the CDU, as Kohl wanted to have an East German female Minister (Sheeler & Anderson, 2014). After CDU's financial scandal, she broke with her earlier proteges to transform the party and install her own political power (Burns, 1978; Cogaltay, 2015).

Chancellorship and Leading a Grand Coalition

Merkel's rise to chancellor was not without luck. CDU became strongest parliamentary group with only 1% of votes over its strongest competitor (social democrats [SPD]; 35.2%:34.2% of votes). In favour of Merkel, a small fraction of social democrats who

were discontent with the SPD's politics, had formed the new left, cannibalising the SPD voter base. Although all left-wing parties together collected 51.2%, Merkel's CDU, as largest parliamentary group, could secure chancellorship in a grand coalition (Bundestagswahl, 2005).

Olsen (2011) proposed that Merkel's personal traits are favourable when leading a grand coalition: putting an emphasis on coalition and consensus building. Even here, Merkel appears more like a party manager than an empathic visionary. She approaches arguments factually, and often avoids taking sides until the very end of an argument. She appears as an arbitrator or facilitator. Operating primarily transactional repeatedly earned her the predicate "uninspired" (Hajrahmatollahi, 2017). From a mindfulness perspective, Merkel appears non-reactive and considerate, with an emphasis of mind over emotion (Ehrlich, 2017).

After three grand coalitions under Merkel, SPD's general election results have dropped from 34.2% to 20.5%, losing its social democratic political profile as a junior partner in Merkel's government. Merkel is known for non-ideologically claiming political themes from her major opposition party. By becoming a slippery target, Merkel's opposition is kept at bay while involving its major players in her politics, at the cost of alienating the right wing in her own party.

Influence of Gender

A solid gender-difference could not be established for interpersonal vs. task style, and autocratic/directive vs. democratic/participative leadership styles. Gipson et al. (2017) report an overall disposition of women to display more transformational leadership styles, particularly scoring lower in management by exception and active/passive substyles of transactional leadership. Merkel, appearing more dominant in face-to-face situations and rational in her speeches, displays more elements of transactional than transformational leadership styles (Olsen, 2011).

Running for Chancellor as a woman may have been a circumstantial factor that secured decisive votes. Disappointed by Gerhard Schröder's capitalist leadership style ("Agenda 2010"; DW, 2017), swing voters might have favoured a progressive CDU leadership, stereotyping a female chancellor, over right-shifted social democrat politics under Schröder (cf. also Schwander & Manow, 2017).

European Union

At EU level, Merkel must mitigate strong leadership vs. democratic principles in a multi-level conflict between domestic, intra-party, and intra-European interests. Merkel's EU politics expose her domestic approach based on social identification and reconciliation rather than vision or expertise: In the Euro crisis, not being a financial expert herself, she let German Minister of Finance Schäuble take the lead (van Esch, 2017). Although German EU dominance has been widely demonised by historic comparisons, the EU has no instrument for German principality. Merkel thus only acted as an arbitrator in the Euro crisis with Greece and Spain. Merkel refrains from centralising power in the EU and championing its leadership, which again is subject to criticism (cf. Meiers, 2015).

Voter Base & Political Program

Striving for consensus and harmony between players, Merkel displays a post-heroic, uninspiring style of leadership. Merkel hesitates to manage by exception even in the face of perceived crisis, often interpreted as lack of inspiration. With a competent public relations team, this conflict is likely not based in self- vs. other-assessment (Cullen, Gentry, & Yammarino, 2015). Merkel reportedly was "a strong vote-getter for her party" (van Esch, 2017, p. 228). Media sensationalism appears to create a discontinuity in perception of what is important between political leaders and the public (Kononova et al., 2009).

Merkel's progressive conservatism (ordoliberalism) has driven innovation in renewable energies and enabled a humanitarian stance in the immigration crisis. Her failure to inspire a large voter base towards her progressive path has enabled a new nationalist

movement right of Merkel's conservative party (cf. Horth & Buchner, 2014). The reconciliation that works well in the grand coalition and international politics fails to work in internal affairs (Olsen, 2011). Merkel manages to unite people in her criticism of Donald Trump's authoritarian exceptionalism.

Conclusion

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has undoubtedly been one of the most influential political leaders during the last decade. In a multi-level approach, she must navigate her political party, the grand coalition, the European Union, and her voter base vs. the public. Merkel approaches contexts with distinct leadership styles. Within her party, she gained institutional power as a dominant, transactional force, then transformed the party with a reputation of cultivating followers that pose no immediate personal threat. She usually appears as rational, considerate mediator in the grand coalition, but lacks profile in today's sensationalist media landscape.

Merkel's leadership style may overall be described as a contingent, situational approach (Cogaltay, 2015). Her metacognitive ability to switch leadership styles between contexts may be her most important enabler (Black, Soto, & Spurlin, 2016). Despite displaying transactional elements in some contexts, Merkel acts post-modern (Hosking, 2006; Raelin, 2015). Merkel's lead displays non-destructive patterns and requires mature followers who set and negotiate their own objectives in their respective fields (cf. Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012). Her non-visionary, factual style may work well with the German culture, but poses a threat for Germany's political landscape in the current, authoritarian backlash.

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