

Abstract

This study examines the role of leader democracy in the selection of party leaders and the strategic communication of traditional political parties, utilizing insights from stakeholder interviews. The study is based on findings concerning the German CDU and its current party leader, Friedrich Merz. The findings reveal that Merz excels in the four competition values of plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD): meritocracy, peaceful conflict-resolution, integration, and repoliticization, indicating his potential as an “intra-party plebiscitary leader.” However, while Merz began to adjust his communication style to position himself as a potential chancellor candidate, it remains uncertain whether he can engage the public as effectively as he does within his party. Merz is seen as successful and competent yet polarizing and controversial, with deficiencies in image, honesty, and political charisma. This highlights the need for co-branding strategy with Secretary General Carsten Linnemann, whose personal brand compensates for Merz's weaknesses. The study suggests that traditional parties select leaders who excel in PLD values to stay competitive, though internal success does not ensure electoral victory, emphasizing the importance of political management and co-branding strategies.