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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

Department of Marketing Communication and Public Relations

**Master's Thesis**

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**Party Leader Selection  
and the Influence of Leader Democracy:  
German CDU Case Study**

Master's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

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In Prague on

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## References

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## **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.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato práce zkoumá roli leader democracy při výběru stranického lídra a ve strategické komunikaci tradičních politických stran s využitím dat z rozhovorů se stakeholdery stranické politiky. Studie vychází z poznatků týkajících se německé CDU a jejího současného stranického lídra Friedricha Merze. Zjištění ukazují, že Merz coby předseda strany vyniká ve čtyřech hodnotách soutěže demokracie plebiscitárního lídra (PLD): meritokracie, mírové řešení konfliktů, integrace a repolitizace. Přestože Merz začal upravovat svůj komunikační styl, aby se postavil do pozice potenciálního kandidáta na kancléře, zůstává nejisté, zda dokáže voliče zaujmout stejně jako členy své strany. Merz je vnímán jako úspěšný a kompetentní, ale také jako polarizující a kontroverzní a jeho osobní značka postrádá dimenze „image“ a „upřímnost“, stejně jako politické charisma. To ukazuje potřebu co-brandingu s generálním tajemníkem Carstenem Linnemannem, jehož osobní značka kompenzuje Merzovy slabé stránky. Studie navrhuje, že pro podpoření své konkurenceschopnosti si tradiční strany mohou vybírat lídry, kteří vynikají v hodnotách soutěže PLD. Vnitrostranický

výkon nicméně nezaručuje úspěch ve volbách, což podtrhuje význam politického managementu strany a strategií co-brandingu.

## **Keywords**

leader democracy, party leader, political personalization, political communication, political branding, intra-party democracy, CDU, Christian Democratic Union, Friedrich Merz

## **Klíčová slova**

leader democracy, předseda strany, personalizace politiky, politická komunikace, politický branding, vnitrostranická demokracie, CDU, Křesťansko-demokratická unie, Friedrich Merz

## **Title**

Party Leader Selection and the Influence of Leader Democracy: German CDU Case Study

## **Název práce**

Výběr lídra strany a vliv leader democracy: Příklad německé CDU

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## **Introduction**

The importance of the party leader in political communication has been increasing over the past decades (Jain et al., 2018). The leader is typically in the center of a political campaign, and with the current widespread use of social media, communicating as an individual is becoming the norm among politicians. The way in which members of the public interact with leaders online, for example on their personal social media profiles, further encourages the development of a personal brand of the party leader. Even before the advent of the internet, it became increasingly necessary to work with the leader's personal presentation to succeed, as the famous Kennedy-Nixon television debate showed in 1960 (Druckman, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is not only the technical development of media and the professionalization of communication which strengthen the position of the party leader. Personalization (or presidentialization) of parties is a relatively well researched phenomenon which has been classified into several other types besides media personalization (Balmas et al., 2014). Personalization is often interpreted in the context of the decrease of power of political groupings, the decline in party membership and the "crisis of democracy" (Castells, 2018; Green, 2016). Leader democracy is a recently revitalized concept which aims to address such developments in modern democracies – it seeks to reconcile the inherent tension between democratic, inclusive participation and an individual leader making decisions (Kane & Patapan, 2012). There is also a relation to be observed between leader democracy and leader selection methods. Cross and Pilet (2015) suggest a connection between party personalization and party leader selection democratization, since a more democratic selection process might enhance the leader's mandate. Leader democracy holds unexplored potential as it could offer a new perspective on party strategic communication. Taking a closer look at it might help address some of the current issues traditional political parties face.

Because of the importance of the leader in modern political communication, selecting a well-suited individual to become the party leader is one of the key objectives of political



management. There are, however, diverse selection methods to choose from. Contemporary political parties opt for solutions ranging from highly exclusive selectorates through party delegate conferences to an all-member vote (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). The choice of a selection method itself can be considered part of the party's communication strategy. This holds true especially in the case of its democratization, which is often seen as an attempt to regain credibility or to present a renewed, modern image (Cross & Pilet, 2015). Party leader selection also poses a unique opportunity in terms of rebranding, as parties receive heightened media attention especially around the time of a leadership change (Somer-Topcu, 2017).

The initial impulse for this study was an interview streamed at the 34<sup>th</sup> party conference of the CDU on January 22, 2022. As part of the side event "Next Generation of the People's Party", Michael Thielen, Secretary General of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) was interviewed by Dr. Sandra Busch-Janser, Head of Political Communication of KAS, and Ruben Schuster, Head of the Foreign Office of the CDU.<sup>1</sup> Michael Thielen commented on the all-member survey which was used for the first time by the CDU to designate its new leader.

While Mr. Thielen expressed some understanding for this selection method in an "exceptional time of turmoil" within the party, he shared his "general skepticism" of using a direct democracy approach instead of a representative one. He stated that party members and party voters were "two very different demographic groups", as the average CDU-member was "older, male, high-income, with a high level of education". Although deeming member involvement to be generally a good thing, Mr. Thielen suggested taking society at large into account when reforming the party, since "ultimately it's the voters who count", not members. The statement implies tension between the interests of the party voters and the party members.

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<sup>1</sup> Internal podcast "Adenauers Woche" of Secretary General Michael Thielen, created by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., available on the employee intranet kasnet.kas.de, uploaded on February 1, 2022.

In party leader selection, three stakeholder groups can be identified. Their preferences should ideally be considered while devising a new management and/or communication strategy for the party (Hughes & Dann, 2009; Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2014). Firstly, the party voters perceive the leader and ultimately decide the success of the party by casting their vote in the elections. There are diverse studies analyzing how the leaders or leadership change affect voters (e.g., Daoust et al., 2021; Somer-Topcu, 2017). Secondly, there are the party's rank and file, who we can expect would be interested in participating in decision-making such as selecting the party leader (Neu, 2017). Thirdly, there is the party elite, which has historically been choosing the party leader as well as making other important decisions concerning the party.

The proposed perspective works with the revitalized concept of leader democracy from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A new take on leader democracy offers a broader foundation which allows us to interpret and integrate known concepts of personalization, party leadership selection and political communication. The intended focus of the study is strategic communication of political parties. There is practically no literature on the empirical study of intra-party leader democracy and its connection to political communication. Considering the innovative theoretical framework, a qualitative study with explorative research questions was deemed appropriate.

The research questions are following:

- 1) How do party voters, party members and the party elite perceive leader democracy in the political communication and political management of their party?
- 2) How do party voters, party members and party elite perceive the connection between the brand personality of the party leader and the brand personality of the party?
- 3) What are the implications of these perceptions for traditional political parties and their political management?

Firstly, theoretical concepts closely relating to leader democracy will be introduced and defined. Secondly, recent developments in the CDU will provide important context of the research, followed by methodology and limitations. Finally, interview results will be presented and analyzed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of three stakeholder groups of party politics – party elite, party members and party supporters. The interviews have been analyzed via open coding. The resulting codes present the basis for the answers to the research questions.

## **1. Theoretical concepts**

Democratic leadership begins within political parties. In case of a victory in general elections, the correctly chosen candidate becomes the government leader. Therefore, appropriate leadership selection is a key objective of political management of the party. If we acknowledge the trend towards leader democracy in public discourse, it is a logical conclusion that a modern democratic party is more than ever under pressure to procure the best possible leader. An individual who is capable of successfully gaining and retaining voter and, perhaps more importantly, party member support. As explored in the subchapter 1.1, political charisma may be an important factor in retaining support.

In the following subchapters, the interconnected concepts of leader democracy, party leadership selection and personalization of political parties are introduced. Finally, their connection to strategic political communication is clarified.

### **1.1 Leader democracy**

Leader democracy is a theoretical concept which challenges the classical “Athenian” model of democracy, in which the people are supposed to self-govern and participate in rational decision-making to achieve common good (Held, 2006). According to leader democracy, citizens choose their leader based on his or her personal characteristics instead of rationally evaluating proposed policies. That is because citizens are only able to judge the performance of a government in retrospect. The elected leader is given the mandate to make decisions on

behalf of the citizens, who assume the role of followers (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, p. 421). In some literature, including Max Weber's original theses, the adjective "plebiscitary" highlights the aspect of the elections as the sole moment in which the leader is either voted into or out of power, with the rest of the electoral term serving as free maneuvering space for the leader to govern within the law and the constitution (Scott, 2018, p.7).

The concept of (plebiscitary) leader democracy originated with Max Weber's "Führerdemokratie". Weber was confronted with the dysfunction and chaos of the parliamentary democracy in the Weimar Republic (Baehr, 1989). Due to later Nazi use of the term "Führer", current scholars almost exclusively use the English term "leader". Nevertheless, it would be grossly inaccurate to associate leader democracy only with dictatorships, as it would exclude all democratic leadership, for which the public seems to call so often. The negative association with authoritarian regimes is considered one of the reasons why the concept has not been researched in depth yet (Pakulski & Higley, 2008, p. 51).

Weber identified three types of legitimate leadership: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic (Pappas, 2006). Charismatic leadership, which aspires to transform current political order, is associated with leader democracy especially often. Contemporary authors recognized the negative connotations of charismatic leadership, whose transformative nature is often seen as a threat to democracy, by alternatively defining quality of "political charisma". This quality may be, in varying degrees, present in any politician and is not limited to those with authoritarian tendencies. Pappas (2006, p. 6) understands political charisma as "a situation in which followers ascribe extraordinary power and competence to their leader while staying exceptionally loyal to them."

Another author closely related to leader democracy is Josef Alois Schumpeter with his post-war minimalist conception of democracy. While contesting the self-rule of the people according to the "classical/Athenian model", he defines democracy as mere competition between leaders in regular, fair elections. Consequently, Schumpeter submits to an elitist

view in which only leaders, i.e. individuals with exceptional merits, are capable of ruling. By contrast, the masses possess a limited capacity for rational choice and common will (Mackie 2009).

	classical democracy	leader democracy
key value	equality	leadership
citizens	autonomous, rational, self-ruling	limited rational capacity and ruling capability
political process	bottom-up	top-down
responsibility	political	individual

Fig 1. – classical democracy vs. leader democracy (Mackie, 2009).

While the two scholars who first presented theoretical concepts of leader democracy belong to early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, several trends seem to illustrate a shift towards leader democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many contemporary democracies face a steep decline in identification with political parties and other mass organizations such as unions due to increasing fragmentation and individualization of society. Expanding on the societal fragmentation, Castells (2018) and Green (2016) describe a “crisis of legitimacy” in liberal democracies, in which citizens feel disconnected from the ruling elites and look for a political alternative.

Many scholars (e.g., Scott, 2018; Illés, & Körösnéyi 2022; Pakulski, 2008) argue that party politics are going through a process of de-ideologization and convergence. Political families in the classical sense such as socialists and conservatives and the traditional ideological cleavages between them lose relevance. In a globalized and fast-paced world, dealing with diverse challenges such as pandemics, wars, economic crises, and climate change requires a

different kind of solutions than static and ideological party programs. Political leaders find themselves devising ad-hoc policy packages to respond to the issue at hand. Pakulski (2008, p. 47) argues that this further underlines the importance of leaders. They are trusted by voters to find solutions to yet unknown future crises and to react swiftly and efficiently – instead of enacting long planned policies. A symptom of this mindset is the spectacle of summits such as G20, during which citizens watch “world leaders” step out their limousines, come together, and supposedly save the situation (ibid., pp. 47-49). The relationship between the personalization of politics and the spectacle of world leaders has been explored by Balmas and Sheaffer (2013), who have empirically proven that media coverage of foreign countries has been increasingly focusing on government leaders at the expense of the countries’ broader political, cultural and social landscapes.

In the past decade, the subject of leader democracy has reemerged in political science. Current authors such as Köröseyi (2007) or Kane and Patapan (2012) have attempted to define democratic leadership. They focus on the inherent tension between democracy and leadership which, according to them, lends more power to the democratic leader than any undemocratic form of leadership could. The power of an elected democratic leader is, after all, demonstrably backed by the citizens – at least to a certain extent. Checks and balances in place should ideally support public trust in the leadership as well. Scholars such as Pakulski (2008) argue that political science must strive to study and to define democratic leadership. That way citizens shall be able to recognize when leadership stops being democratic more readily, protecting our democracies from backsliding.

Illés and Köröseyi (2022) defined four values of competition in (plebiscitary) leader democracy, which is a pioneer attempt to set standards of democratic leadership. The following criteria represent more than mere rules of competition. They can also be interpreted as qualities thanks to which an individual may succeed as a “true” democratic leader:

1. Peaceful Conflict-Resolution: Competition in elections provides a method for peaceful leadership selection and conflict resolution. It is a way for the electorate to express their

views and maintain hope for future victories, akin to sports fans supporting their teams. A democratic leader is therefore required to respect the result of fair and free elections. This aspect of competition ensures that the losing side respects the election results (ibid., pp. 433-434).

2. Meritocratic Selection: Political leaders are selected based on their merits and qualities. Voters aim to choose leaders who are qualitatively superior to represent them. The meritocratic effect may be compromised in highly polarized politics where loyalty can overshadow performance, but certain leader qualities like endurance and rhetorical skills remain essential (ibid., p. 434).
3. Integration: Leaders act as entrepreneurs of identity, crafting and molding collective identities and integrating various perspectives and interests. This integrative function is valuable in politics as it mobilizes different groups of followers for collective aims. However, it can also lead to polarization (ibid., pp. 434-435).
4. Repoliticization: Competition serves as a counterbalance to depoliticization by challenging the status quo and subverting institutionalized norms. It brings politics back into spheres that may have slipped out of democratic control, such as globalization and technocratic decision-making. However, questioning the rules of the game too much can undermine the peaceful nature of competition (ibid., p. 435).

The values stipulate a need to balance between peaceful resolution and the potential for polarization, between meritocratic selection and the influence of partisan loyalty, and between repoliticization and the stability of democratic norms. While the authors suggest that these trade-offs require further theoretical work to fully understand and address the challenges and dangers of leader democracy (ibid., p. 436), the four criteria may present a useful starting point for strategic political communication. It is possible to use the values to identify desirable messages the leader or leader candidate should communicate. To summarize, the ideal leader should successfully communicate 1. a perspective of peace and social cohesion, 2. superiority in relevant skills and merits, 3. an integration of diverse interests, 4. a political cause worth fighting for.

On the other hand, there is criticism of the entire academic renaissance of leader democracy and the attempts to develop it further. Scott (2018) argues that the reemergence of the “political language” of leader democracy only worsens the issues it seeks to address. As a sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy, focusing on leaders reinforces the “politics of spectacle” in which citizens assume a passive role. Scott (ibid., p.16) concludes that unrealistically high expectations towards leaders, which come with the logic of leader democracy, only set up citizens for disappointment.

Regardless of the positive or negative opinions on the academic renaissance of leader democracy, the related political, cultural and social phenomena are reality. It is enough to look at political leaders carefully cultivating their personal image, the number of personalized political parties, “world leader” summits and opinion pieces calling for strong leadership. The remaining question is: How can established democratic parties respond to the onslaught of charismatic leaders?

## **1.2 Party leadership selection**

Party leadership selection is an important part of political management, which is a field of both practice and research focusing on how political subjects (in this case parties) utilize different management methods to achieve their goals through their representatives. Lees-Marshment (2020, pp. 4-5) pinpoints how the recruitment of “the right people for the job” is a major concern of political practitioners. There is no standardized training for a future a party leader, just the general assumption that being a parliamentarian for several years should sufficiently prepare the candidate (ibid., p. 6).

Despite the lack of formal training, the party leader instantly becomes a top-level manager (Lees-Marshment, 2020, p. 9). They oversee the selection of ministers and candidates, they help define the policies the party is promoting and must ensure party members remain united on key issues. In terms of political marketing, the party leader becomes the face or even the program of the party, the most important person to bring across the message to the media and voters (Cross & Pilet, 2015, pp. 2-3).



Hazan and Rahat (2010) classify candidate selection methods, which can also be applied to party leadership selection, according to their inclusivity. Democratization of the process can often be explained as an attempt to rehabilitate the party’s image after a defeat (Cross & Pilet, 2015), especially in the eyes of party members. Besides the wish to appear renewed and democratic, there can also be other motivation behind a more inclusive selectorate – reinforcing the leader’s position in relation to other influential players within the party. By mobilizing the rank-and-file, individual members can be empowered at the expense of exclusive organized activist groups (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; pp. 9-10). The trend towards a more democratic mandate of the party leader corresponds with the trend towards leader democracy. Gruber et. al (2015) indeed confirm the recurring phenomenon of party leaders leveraging their broad popular mandate against potential challengers.

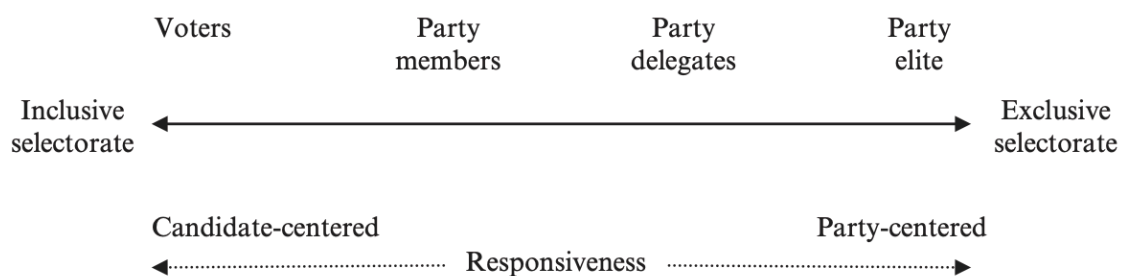


Fig. 2 – The inclusivity of selectorates, Hazan & Rahat (2010), p. 149.

Lisi, Freire and Barberà (2015) prove that parties of all western political families except for the extreme left and extreme right have moved towards more inclusive selection methods in the past decades. Chiru et al. (2015) however show that true competition for party leadership remained rare in western democracies. “Coronations” of the only candidate were common, as well as leaders capitalizing on their incumbency advantage, losing the race extremely rarely, and candidates often winning by an overwhelming margin. In fact, Germany has been ranked as the least competitive of the observed countries in the period of 1965-2012 (pp. 30-31). Whether the lack of competition changed in the German CDU after 2012 will be explored in chapter 2.

While a new leadership selection method may be an important message for the party members, a new leader is also a unique opportunity in the communication with the party voters. The recently elected leaders garner special attention of the media and voters. Proof of leadership change being a useful tool of political management can be provided by Somer-Topcu (2017), who found that following a leadership change, voters tend to understand party policy better and support it more than before.

### **1.3 Personalization of political parties**

Personalization of political parties can be seen as the link between leader democracy and the personalization of politics in general. Increasing political personalization is a fact proven by several studies (e.g., Marino et al., 2022). Especially media personalization has been observed in multiple articles (prominently Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013 and Balmas et. al, 2014). Poguntke (2009) even documented real changes to the German political system linked to the growing significance of the chief executive.

Western democracies are transforming due to the changing nature of political issues, individualization of societies and disrupting influences of new technologies. Leader democracy is one of the possible outcomes of such pressures and it might be considered a change for worse. However, if as a society we wish to preserve some form of democracy, a shift towards leader democracy might be one of the more favorable outcomes, compared to the possibility of a full-fledged autocratic regime. Scholars suggest a benefit of politicians, political professionals, political scientists, journalists and the broader public acknowledging and discussing the shift towards leader democracy (Pakulski & Higley, 2008; Illés & Körösenyi, 2022). The ideal outcome of such discussions would be a broader consensus on institutional, legal, and ethical limits of leader democracy, protecting the political regime from autocratization.

Given the number of studies, it is possible to accept varying degrees of personalization in virtually all aspects of politics as a fact. Expanding on this insight, it is suggested that leader

democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an evolution of political party personalization. The proposed perspective on leader democracy is founded on charismatic party leaders who act as carriers of political personalization. Charismatic leaders are empowered via party leadership selection, which means that leader democracy begins (or ends) within political parties. The charismatic leaders are then used as a heuristic device by voters (Holloway & Hendrie, 2023) – a certain cognitive shortcut which makes decisions about parties' complex policy proposals and positions easier by judging the leader's personal characteristics instead.

To effectively work with leader democracy as an evolution of personalized party politics, it is necessary to be aware of different kinds of personalization. Balmas et al. (2014) established a differentiation between centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization signifies increasing importance and prominence of the individual who is officially in a leadership position (e.g., party leader, prime minister), while decentralized personalization applies to multiple individuals within the same organization (e.g., parliamentarians, ministers). In a centrally personalized party, the party leader becomes the face of the political brand and embodies the whole party.

Historically, centralized personalization was the norm. However, with the online presence of politics and politicians, decentralized personalization has become more prominent. Simultaneously, decentralized personalization can be more than a result of competition between party members. It is also a recognized tool in political marketing which helps the party utilize multiple faces to communicate policies according to the needs and preferences of different target markets (Hughes & Dann, 2009). Moreover, decentralized personalization might be beneficial to the party by cultivating a pool of potential leader candidates for the future, providing a partial answer to the HR issue in political management (Lees-Marshment, 2020, pp. 4-6).

## **1.4 Strategic communication**

In its broadest sense, strategic communication was defined by Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) as “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication

agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals.” Strategic communication is a comprehensive approach to communication which makes use of known tools and methods from public relations and marketing. Current professionalization of political communication and political marketing comes with the ambition to be more “strategic” and comprehensive. However, the role of strategic communication in politics has been academically under-examined. Kiouisis and Strömbäck (2014) explore the strategic context of political communication: just like in political management professionals use business management methods, strategic political communication uses tools known from the business sphere to manage stakeholder relations or branding.

Even though internal communication in businesses has been extensively studied, strategic political communication has been typically defined and studied as communication on the outside of the party organization. However, the proposed perspective also considers internal party communication towards the party members. Not only voters, but also most party members have incomplete information about the party leader and their level of competence. Both stakeholder groups – party members and party voters – may therefore use the personal brand of the leader as a cognitive shortcut to assign characteristics to them and make their decision based on this connection (Speed et al., 2015; Holloway & Hendrie, 2023). Overall, a political party which incorporates the leader and their personal brand in its communication strategy from the beginning, both for inward and outward communication, may have a higher chance of communicating effectively and successfully. Considering the influence of leader democracy and personalization in political marketing, it is especially useful to make the most of the leader’s personal brand when devising the party’s campaign.

Kiouisis and Strömbäck (2014) identified stakeholder engagement as a key principle of successful political management. De Bussy and Kelly (2010) also pledged for further integration of stakeholder thinking and stakeholder relationship management in political communication. Kiouisis and Strömbäck (2014, p. 386) consider strategic communication “critical to all stages of stakeholder engagement“. Furthermore, “strategic political

communication should be employed to develop and maintain quality relationships between political organizations and their key stakeholders” (ibid., p. 387). Hughes and Dann (2009, p. 250) identified specific stakeholder groups in political marketing according to their source of power, active or passive role, and target group in society. In a communication strategy, these stakeholder groups ought to be addressed with respect to their unique attributes.

The authors’ approach highly corresponds with the stakeholder-focused framework of this study. Party elite, party members and party voters can be identified as the three distinct stakeholder groups which are directly connected to party leadership selection. The party leader must cultivate a quality relationship with these stakeholder groups to be considered successful – one who unites party members, creates the impression of a legible party with clear positions and attracts and retains voter support as well. Such a goal requires of the leader to employ dedicated communication strategies to address each of the stakeholder groups’ concerns and expectations.

In leader democracy, the power of the charismatic leader is legitimized by the approval and loyalty of their followers, which attribute exceptional competence to the individual (Pappas, 2006). A party leader in a “leader democracy influenced” system needs mass support of the stakeholder groups to remain in power. Follower approval of the party leader legitimizes their decisions and leadership style.

#### **1.4.1 Personal brand and brand personality**

Simultaneously, mass support reinforces the personal brand of the party leader. Speed et al. (2015) find that in the case of political parties, the human (personal) brand is inseparable from the party brand, unlike in commercial or entertainment brands, where for example an influencer can be separated from the physical product they promote. By contrast, an elected representative enacts the party policies and cannot be separated from them. This implies that in political marketing more than in any other marketing field, it is crucial to capitalize on the personal brand (in this case, the party leader) to successfully manage the inanimate brand (in this case, the political party).

A brand is a shortcut which leads the voters to connect the party with certain characteristics, values and policies. The characteristics assigned to the brand are cultivated by the party's long-term political management, communication, and marketing. The brand shortcut can be embodied by the party's name, logo, colors, slogan, or the leader themselves. Holloway and Hendrie (2023) observed "leader heuristic" which is used by both parties and voters<sup>2</sup>, in which "party leaders become a heuristic device themselves, allowing voters to make their decision based on the character of a person as opposed to a political brand which may lack coherence in its message" (p. 4). The authors stress that social media amplify this phenomenon.

The connection between leader democracy and political branding can also be pinpointed. Speed et al. (ibid., p.146) identify that "without confidence in the leader's ability to deliver, (...) the equity in the political [party] brand will diminish." The proposed key to a successful political brand – the confidence in the leader's ability to deliver results to their followers – seems highly congruent with Pappas' (2006) definition of political charisma (chapter 1.1).

Tying together perceived personality traits of a human (such as charisma in a leader) and the abstract phenomenon of a brand, Aaker (1997) introduced the concept of brand personality. Brand personality is a concept which describes how consumers (in this case voters) assign human-like characteristics such as youth and sincerity not only to individuals, but also to inanimate brands (such as political parties) and personal brands of individuals (such as political leaders). Aaker (ibid.) defined five dimensions of a brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.

The five dimensions have since been operationalized for use in political branding by multiple authors across the world. Smith (2009) has modified it for the reality of British politics, most notably adding a sixth dimension of "uniqueness" and changing the more general dimension

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<sup>2</sup> As implied in subchapter 1.4, it is plausible that leaders or leader candidates leverage their personal brand within the party as well.

of “competence” to “leadership”. Smith’s (2009) six dimensions updated for political branding therefore are: honesty, image, leadership, spirited, toughness, and uniqueness. Žižlavský and Eibl (2011) have modified Smith’s scale for the political and social context in the Czech Republic, leaving out the dimension of “uniqueness” again. Jain et al. (2018) explored the brand personality of a political leader from the Indian BJP party. The authors (ibid.) find that embedding the brand personality dimensions “competence” (which they connected to energy) and “sincerity” (which according to the authors leads agreeableness) into the communication strategy leads to optimal likeability of the political leader (ibid., p. 315). Optimal likeability of the leader can help extend the projection of these desired characteristics to the political party brand (ibid., p. 302).

Smith (2009), Žižlavský and Eibl (2011) and Jain et al. (2018) show that Aaker’s (1997) dimensions of brand personality can be applied to political branding in culturally diverse democracies. The different operationalizations were applied to both leader and party brands and do not present fundamental changes to the original five dimensions. For the purpose of this study, Smith’s (2009) broadly acknowledged six dimensions will be used as a tool for the open coding of interview responses related to brand personality. However, it is possible that Žižlavský and Eibl’s (2011) version applied to Czech politics may appear more accurate due to the cultural proximity of Czechia and Germany. In that case, the only significant difference would be the absence of evidence of the brand personality dimension “uniqueness”.

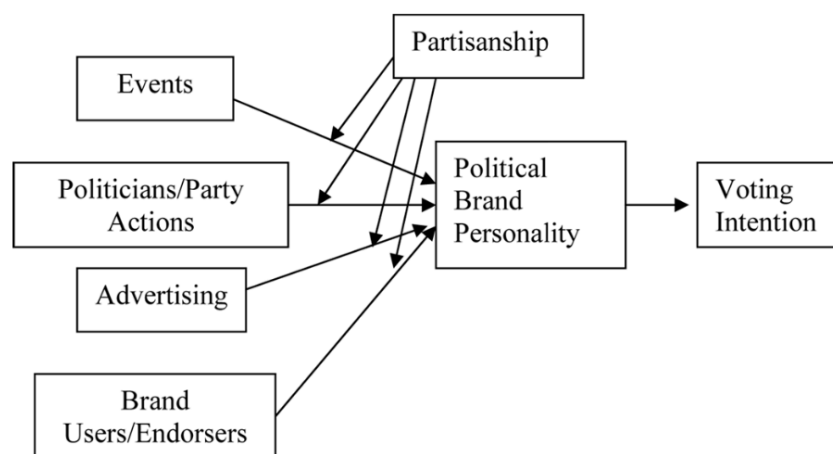


Fig. 3 – The model of Smith (2009, p. 213) echoes the theory of perceived personality traits working as a direct heuristic device for voters.

## **2. Context**

This chapter outlines the characteristics of the German political system that are relevant to individual party leadership. Secondly, it traces the political profile of the CDU and the most recent developments of its leadership.

### **2.1 German political system**

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 has been written with lessons of the Weimar Republic in mind. Federalism, particularly strong institutions, and a political culture prizing stability shape the resulting political system (Feldkamp, 2008). Many argue that due to its Nazi past, most of the German public responds negatively to grand displays of charismatic leadership and personal authority. The reservations are paralleled by the “reluctant leadership” of Germany in the international arena (Destradi, 2015), overwhelmingly focusing on trade and soft power at least until the announced “Zeitenwende” after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (Blumenau, 2022). Despite its reluctant leadership, Germany's relevance is determined by having the largest economy and population in Europe.

The German electoral system can be considered mixed-proportional (Sartori, 1999, p. 21) or personalized-proportional (Chytílek et. al., 2009, p. 2014). While half the MPs receive a so-called direct mandate in a majoritarian vote, the parliamentary election produces fully proportional results (Sartori, 1999). The direct mandate is the personalized component of the electoral system, in which voters choose one specific candidate to represent their constituency. Winning the direct mandate requires a relatively high level of popularity of the personality in the region, reinforcing the importance of personal branding (see subchapter 1.4.1). The personalized-proportional electoral system in Germany emphasizes individual candidates, further encouraging political personalization.



The party system can be classified as moderate pluralist (Sartori, 2005, p.158), with a limited number of approximately five relevant parties in the parliament and coalition governments being the norm.<sup>3</sup> The chancellor, elected by the members of the federal parliament, is the head of the federal government and commander-in-chief of the armed forces during wartime. The exclusive competences of the federal government include foreign policy, defense, international trade, railways, telecommunications, and postal services. In most other areas, such as health, education, welfare, taxation or the police, the federal government shares power (or rather competes, as the constitution stipulates) with the federal states (Sturm, 2009). Therefore, the chancellor is mainly seen as the leader and representative of Germany in the international arena, and in domestic policy issues as the main negotiator with the 16 federal states. At the same time, the chancellor is responsible for negotiations within the government coalition.

Chancellor candidates are almost exclusively party leaders. The attention paid to chancellor candidates is attributed to centralized personalization. Has this emphasis been changing in the German discourse in the recent years? According to Balmas et al. (2013), there was no empirical evidence of increasing centralized media personalization, “probably because the focus on the chancellor has always been very high” (p. 39). A possible explanation of the media consistently centering the chancellor is the past stability of the German leadership: Helmut Kohl ruled for 16, Gerhard Schröder for 8, Angela Merkel for 16 years. Another plausible explanation for the focus on the chancellor and chancellor-candidates is the Americanization (also presidentialization) of the German political system. Poguntke (2009) finds proof of systemic change in Germany, such as in the increasing power of advisory bodies which are directly appointed by the chancellor. Even though authors have not clearly defined a causal relationship between the stability of the leadership, the ongoing presidentialization of the system and centralized media personalization, it is safe to say all

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<sup>3</sup> However, even the traditionally stable German party landscape is becoming more fragmented, with possible 6-8 parties being relevant contenders in the 2025 federal election (Jacobsen, 2024).

three factors together contribute to the centering of the chancellor and chancellor-candidates in campaigns and public discourse.

## 2.2 CDU

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has been a major political force since the establishment of the German Federal Republic, having led 17 out of 25 federal governments (*Die Bundeskanzler der Bundesrepublik seit 1949*, Der Bundeskanzler, 2024). It is part of the center-right Christian democratic political family of people's parties (Freire & Tsatsanis, 2015). As of 2024, the European People's Party has been the largest group in the European Parliament since 1999 (*EPP Group in the European Parliament*, eppgroup.eu, retrieved Feb 6, 2024). This makes the CDU a well-suited subject of a case study, as it is a prime example of a traditional government party which, while staying a relevant player, is currently facing the challenges of decreasing membership and fragmentation of the political landscape. This fate is shared by other traditional center-right parties in Europe, which cooperate as “sister parties” and exchange know-how within the European institutions and bilaterally. For this reason, the findings of this study may be a relevant starting point for other political parties as well.

The CDU had 371.986 members as of February 2023. In 1990, it was 790.000 (Schmid, 2023). Despite the constant decrease in membership, there seems to be an increase in member engagement. While until the 1990s being a “sleeping member” was the norm, the proportion of members willing to actively work for the party and assume office has nearly doubled from 25% in 1977 to 47% in 2015 (Neu, 2017, p. 37). Member calls for more participation have been partially addressed by the 2015 party reform “My CDU 2017”, which had promised increased member rights and participation.<sup>4</sup> The primary objective of the reform was attracting new members, primarily young people, and also more women.

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<sup>4</sup> *Meine CDU 2017. Meine Volkspartei*. Resolution from the 28. CDU party congress, Karlsruhe, 14.-15. December 2015. Retrieved April 5, 2024, <https://archiv.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/beschluss-meinecd2017.pdf?file=1>

Decker and Küppers (2022) consider this effort unsuccessful – as of 2021, 73,4 % of CDU members were male with the average member age being 60,8 years. Compared to both the general population and the demographics of CDU voters, CDU members are on average older, more male, more highly educated, higher income (Klein et. al., 2019) and consider themselves further right on the political spectrum (Neu, 2017, p. 11).

Nevertheless, reform efforts have not stopped after 2015. Two major shifts initiated changes within the party. In 2018, Angela Merkel ceded party leadership after 18 years. Until 2018, the CDU has been exceptionally stable in terms of party leadership with Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel leading the party for 59 years combined (Decker, 2022). The second shift came in 2021, when the CDU went into opposition after 16 years. There has been a widely described “fatigue” and lack of clear identity and ideas, especially after ruling in the so-called Grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party for two consecutive terms from 2013 until 2021 (Hofmann, 2018). Angela Merkel announced her gradual resignation from power in 2018, which was interpreted as taking responsibility for the poor election results in the state of Hesse (Beitzer, 2018). Exceptional turmoil at the top of the party ensued after Merkel had resigned as a party leader, although she remained chancellor until 2021.

### **2.2.1 Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer**

During the final stretch of Merkel’s rule as a chancellor from 2018 until 2021, the party was led by Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. Former party Secretary General, prime minister of Saarland and federal minister of defense Kramp-Karrenbauer was part of the more left-leaning wing of the party and known as Merkel’s preferred choice.

She is a prime example of a career party politician: she has joined the CDU at the age of 18, was an active member of the youth organization Junge Union and became a member of a municipal council at the age of 22. She came from a conservative Catholic background and studied law and political science. In 1991, when she was 29 years old, she assumed her first

professional position in the party as a policy and planning officer. In 1999, she was instrumental in the CDU's success in the Saarland state election as a personal advisor to the "Spitzenkandidat" Peter Müller. The CDU won the absolute majority in the state parliament of Saarland and formed a single party government after 14 years in the opposition. By that time, Kramp-Karrenbauer was also president of the Women's CDU organization (Frauenunion) in Saarland (Zehender 2024).

One year later, in 2000, prime minister Müller appoints Kramp-Karrenbauer as the new Minister of Interior of Saarland, which makes her the first woman to lead a ministry of interior in the history of Germany. In the following decade, she assumes a different position in the state government. In 2011, she finally becomes the prime minister of Saarland as well as the party leader in the state (Zehender 2024). At the request of chancellor Angela Merkel, Kramp-Karrenbauer leaves Saarbrücken for Berlin and assumes the office of Secretary General of the (federal) CDU. As Secretary General, she is responsible for the ideological and political direction of the CDU, attending 50 discussions with party members and supporters all over Germany (Ferstl, 2018).<sup>5</sup> The married mother of three had gradually made her name as political "all-rounder", having successfully delivered results in diverse high-level government and party offices. She was commonly described as a friendly and talkative character who had no difficulty speaking with anyone (*AKK wird 60: Die CDU gratuliert*, CDU.de, 2022).

After Merkel's announced transfer of party presidency in 2018, Kramp-Karrenbauer competes against federal Minister of Health Jens Spahn and Friedrich Merz in the party leader election. In the first round, she receives 45% of the 1.001 delegate votes and must therefore compete in a run-off against Friedrich Merz, who received 39%. Kramp-Karrenbauer narrowly wins the run-off: with 51.75%, she is elected as the new leader of the

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<sup>5</sup> In German politics, party Secretary General may be the second most prominent position in the party leadership. Holders of this office are very present in the media and known to the public for commenting on the ideological and political changes, often "testing the waters" with more provocative statements regarding the future political developments compared to the party leader themselves (see e.g., Ferstl, 2018).

CDU. In 2019, she also assumes the office of the federal Minister of Defense (Zehender, 2024).

In 2020, Kramp-Karrenbauer announced her decision to step down as CDU leader and not run for chancellor in the upcoming federal election. This announcement came after a controversial vote in the eastern German state of Thuringia in February 2020. The CDU members of the state parliament voted together with the far-right AfD for the FDP prime minister candidate Thomas Kemmerich. Such an act of cooperation with a far-right party was unprecedented in Germany's postwar history. Kramp-Karrenbauer struggled to establish her authority within the party and prevent any cooperation with the AfD. The joint vote of the AfD, CDU, and FDP for the prime minister was scrapped only after chancellor Merkel personally intervened, leading to subsequent re-elections in Thuringia. It was the end of Kramp-Karrenbauer's career in politics (Börnsen, 2022).

### **2.2.2 Armin Laschet**

The next party leader and chancellor-candidate was former prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia Armin Laschet, also affiliated with Angela Merkel. Like his predecessor Kramp-Karrenbauer, he comes from the westernmost part of Germany, is Roman Catholic, studied law and political science, and is a married father of three. Armin Laschet joined the CDU as a young student in the late 1970s because of a political conflict regarding the school reform in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Alongside his law studies, Laschet was also trained as a journalist and worked as a freelancer. His first political office was the councilor of the city of Aachen, where he became known as a skilled debater. In the 1990s, he also worked as a director of a publishing house (Marx, 2024).

In 1994, Laschet convinced the CDU Aachen to choose him as the contender for the personalized vote in the federal elections in which individual candidates compete for a majority – the winner takes the constituency. A successful personalized campaign sent Armin Laschet to the capital. With his memorable slogan “Listen. Decide. Act.”, he was

elected to the German Bundestag with 46.2% of the personal vote, winning the direct mandate representing the so-called “Charlemagne's constituency” of Aachen (Marx, 2024).

In 1999, he was elected a Member of the European Parliament. In 2005, he returned to the federal state politics of North Rhine-Westphalia as Germany’s first Minister of Integration. He became known statewide for his then unique action plan for integration in education and in the workplace. Laschet considered better integration of immigrants a key part of the transformation of North Rhine-Westphalia from an industrial region to a “knowledge-based” economy. In 2012, he was elected Chairman of the CDU North Rhine-Westphalia, after two election losses for the party in the state. As a new chairman, he reorganized the party and the parliamentary group in terms of staff and policy focus. In 2015, he strongly defended the refugee policy of the chancellor Angela Merkel. For Laschet, a devout Catholic, there was no alternative to a humanitarian refugee policy (Marx, 2024).

After an election success in 2017, Laschet became the prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia. In 2018, he notably presented the first debt-free budget of the federal state since 1973 (Felten, 2018). As a political leader of the most populous German state, Laschet’s importance became significant on the federal CDU level. After Kramp-Karrenbauer’s resignation, he ran for the position of the federal party leader. The main argument for Laschet as a potential party leader and chancellor candidate was his reputation as a successful prime minister of 18 million Germans, implying that he would be able to successfully lead the entire country as well (Deutschlandfunk, 2021).

His competitors for the party leadership are also from North Rhine-Westphalia: Friedrich Merz, who made a second attempt, and Norbert Röttgen, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the German Bundestag. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, a digital party conference was held for the first time in January 2021. Merz won the first round of online voting, followed closely by Laschet. Laschet emerged victorious from the decisive second round, beating Merz by 521 votes to 466. Both Laschet and Kramp-Karrenbauer were elected in a vote of 1.001 party delegates (Marx, 2024; Zehender, 2024). Though the number

1.001 could be considered a relatively broad electorate, it is a plausible claim that the delegates are the elite among more than 370.000 party members.

Already a party leader, prior to being finally chosen as the chancellor candidate by the party executive committee, Laschet had been strongly challenged by Markus Söder, the leader of the Bavarian sister party CSU<sup>6</sup> and Bavarian prime minister. This contributed to Laschet's relatively weak position in the campaign (Hildebrand & Delhaes, 2021). Critics saw Laschet as not strong enough of a leader who is relying on "being nice" too heavily and does not offer clear political positions (Münchenberg, 2021). However, the definitive turning point in the election campaign came after the disastrous floods in Ahrtal, North Rhine-Westphalia, in which 135 people lost their lives. Armin Laschet attended the site of the disaster as prime minister of the affected state along with the president Frank-Walter Steinmeier on July 17, 2021. Armin Laschet was caught laughing during the president's speech remembering the victims. The picture of the moment was shared by all media outlets and Laschet apologized publicly (Chambers, 2022).

Laschet gave up the party leader office after the unsuccessful federal election in September 2021. In a speech, he took full responsibility for the campaign and the result: "Nothing can be glossed over. As party leader and candidate for chancellor, I am responsible for this result. I am responsible for the election campaign and nobody else." (Marx, 2024). However, he remained member of the Bundestag, focusing on foreign policy and Franco-German relations (*Deutscher Bundestag - Armin Laschet*, Bundestag.de, 2022). As of 2024, he is once again occasionally portrayed in a positive light – for example as someone who would understand and cooperate with Emmanuel Macron better than chancellor Olaf Scholz (Gerster, 2024).

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<sup>6</sup> The Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) runs together with the CDU in the federal elections and forms one CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the federal parliament. This means both parties must agree on one chancellor candidate (Hildebrand & Delhaes, 2021).

### 2.2.3 Friedrich Merz

Corresponding with Cross and Pilet (2015), the unsuccessful federal election and return to the opposition posed an opportunity for party renewal and some degree of democratization. For the first time in the history of the party, all members were allowed to vote for their preferred candidate in December 2021. 66% of the members (254.957 people) participated in the election. Friedrich Merz, who had run in the previous two delegate votes and lost to both Kramp-Karrenbauer and Laschet, emerged as a winner with 62,5% of all member votes (*Friedrich Merz ist designierter CDU-Vorsitzender*, CDU.de, 2021). Merz was known as Merkel's long-standing rival and a member of the conservative and economically liberal wing of the party, which had not been represented in the party elite during Merkel's era (Hennecke 2024).

Just like his former rivals Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Armin Laschet, Merz is from the Rhine region of Germany, Roman Catholic, studied law and is married with three children (Hennecke, 2024). However, there are major differences between Merz and his two predecessors. While Kramp-Karrenbauer and Laschet were considered staunch allies of Angela Merkel, Merz was always seen as the very opposite, her rival. When Merkel became chancellor, Merz left top-level politics and returned only after her retirement announcement in 2018. Next to being considered the opposite of Angela Merkel within the CDU, he also has a very different image compared to both Laschet and Kramp-Karrenbauer, who above all projected a friendly, approachable persona. In the recent years, Friedrich Merz was often portrayed as “tough” and “unlikeable” (Heckmann, 2022).

Similar to his two predecessors, Merz joined the CDU when he was 18. After his studies, he worked as a judge and attorney. In 1989, he was elected an MEP. In 1994, he became a member of the Bundestag by obtaining a direct mandate in the personalized vote, winning an absolute majority in his constituency for three election terms until 2005. As MP, his areas of responsibility were the economy and fiscal policy, and in the early 2000s he became known as the creator of the CDU proposal for a tax reform. After the CDU had gone into opposition in 1998, he was recognized as the face of the conservative opposition against the



“red-green” government. He became the leader of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in 2000 (Hennecke, 2024). In 2001, he expressed desire to become the chancellor candidate. However, the party leader Merkel and members of the party elite chose the Bavarian leader of the CSU Edmund Stoiber instead. After Stoiber had clearly failed as a chancellor candidate, the party leader Merkel swiftly replaced Merz as leader of the parliamentary opposition in a tactical move to finally become the next chancellor candidate, winning the elections in 2005 (Heckmann, 2022).

During his period outside of top-level politics, Merz had an illustrious career in the private sector: he became chair of the German arm of the U.S. investment fund BlackRock, worked for the U.S. law firm Mayer Brown and served on the board of numerous companies. He also presided prestigious the Atlanticist society Atlantik-Brücke, clearly manifesting his foreign policy orientation (Hennecke, 2024). Upon his return to politics in 2018, he was strongly criticized for stating that he was part of the “upper middle class” while earning “just over a million Euros a year” (Shalal, 2018). Simultaneously, he was praised by his supporters for his success and expertise in a key policy area – economics and finance.

After his political comeback, he became deputy chairman of the lobby group Economic Council of the CDU in 2019. In the 2021 federal election under chancellor candidate Armin Laschet, he ran once more in his former constituency and obtained the direct mandate in the personalized vote again. Finally in 2022, at the third attempt, he was elected party leader in the all-member vote (Hennecke, 2024).

With Friedrich Merz elected as the new leader, the CDU started a process of ideological renewal, searching for its new course and identity. Compared to other German political parties, the CDU is known to have a particularly decentralized federal structure. It also unites its many different formal and informal interest und ideological groups in a particularly pluralistic manner (Decker, 2022). Rediscovering a common set of principles which would integrate all of them was therefore considered a rather complex project.

#### 2.2.4 Secretary General Carsten Linnemann

A close associate of Friedrich Merz, Carsten Linnemann, has been elected as party vice-president in 2022. In 2023, Carsten Linnemann additionally became the party Secretary General (*Lebenslauf*, Carsten-Linnemann.de, 2024). In the latter position, Linnemann replaced Mario Czaja from East Berlin, who was considered closer to the more left-leaning wing around former chancellor Merkel, also of East German origin (MDR.de, 2023). By contrast, Carsten Linnemann comes from North Rhine-Westphalia, like the party leader Friedrich Merz, and is also part of the conservative, economically liberal wing. Linnemann was born in 1977, making him 22 years Merz's junior (*Lebenslauf*, Carsten-Linnemann.de, 2024).

Since 2022, Linnemann led the newly established “Programm- und Grundsatzkommission” (program and basic principle committee) consisting of several expert committees. After a year and a half long process, which included party member polls, regional conferences and a “Grundsatzkonvent” (convention on basic principles) the party executive committee unveiled the “Grundsatzprogramm” (basic principle program) in December 2023 (*Dr. Carsten Linnemann: Unser Weg zur inhaltlichen Erneuerung*, CDU.de, 2022). The ideas from the program are presented along with the slogan “Grundsätzlich CDU” (Basically CDU) (*Startseite*, Grundsatzprogramm-CDU.de, 2023), which communicates to both party members and voters a newly found unity and clarity. In February and March 2024, the program draft was discussed at follow-up regional conferences for party members. The final version of the program was finally accepted by delegates in May 2024 at the federal party congress (*Deutschlandtour*, Grundsatzprogramm-CDU.de, 2024). At the congress, Merz was coronated as the party leader with no competitors, receiving 90% of the delegate votes and even words of support from the current potential rival, CDU prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia Hendrik Wüst (Henkel, 2024).

The new “basic principle program” is widely interpreted as a return to more conservative, right-wing ideas and policies (Mendgen, 2023). Key topics include a stricter approach to migration and integration, focus on security and a conservative fiscal policy

(*Grundsatzprogramm der CDU Deutschlands*, Grundsatzprogramm-CDU.de/Entwurf, 2024). As of April 2024, Friedrich Merz positions himself as the future chancellor candidate, though the official party candidate of CDU/CSU has not yet been nominated by the party executive committee. Other potential contenders include current prime ministers of Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia, Markus Söder and Hendrik Wüst, respectively (Mendgen, 2024).

Though historically seen as unpopular with the public, the popularity of Friedrich Merz has grown to 40,5% of the German population in January 2024, overtaking several members of the government. According to the director of opinion poll agency INSA Herrmann Binkert, Merz is profiting from his perceived competence in the field of economics in times of recession in Germany. The Zeitgeist in large parts of Europe has shifted towards more conservative policies centering the economy and security, which fits the image of the party leader and revamped image of the whole party (Kain, 2024). In 2024, the CDU/CSU is consistently the strongest party in federal election polls with results reaching just over 30% (*Sonntagsfrage zur Bundestagswahl nach einzelnen Instituten*, Statista.de, 2024).

At the same time, a pluralistic approach seeking to integrate different priorities can be observed in the political management of the party. Contrary to the expectations, Friedrich Merz personally pushed for quotas for women in all party committees, which are to remain in effect at least until 2029 (Herrmann & Koopmann, 2022). On social media, Merz presents himself as someone who has united a large party and a large parliamentary group, testifying to “good atmosphere” and “positive feedback” from members of the broader party elite. In the interview excerpt shared on Instagram, Merz claims his personal strength is “motivating and leading a team” in a successful manner that “cannot be achieved by authority alone”. (@merzcdu, January 22, 2024). Such communication can be interpreted as an attempt to position himself as a charismatic leader, one who has earned trust and loyalty of the party and who can offer various personal qualities to his followers (Pappas, 2006).

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative study seeks to explore the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. The chosen method is a semi-structured interview, which usually involves an interviewer who follows a general interview schedule but can adapt the order of questions. The questions tend to be broader in scope compared to those in a structured interview. Additionally, the interviewer has some flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on significant responses (Bryman, 2012, p. 212).

Aberbach and Rockman (2002, pp. 675-676) consider semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and their flexible order the best format for interviews with political professionals, who typically deliver well-structured, coherent answers and respond well to space for their unique answer structure. A semi-structured format allows the researcher to capture the richness of respondents' individual answers while giving sufficient structure for coding (ibid., p. 675). For these reasons, an interview guide with five distinct topics and outlines of questions was implemented. The interviewer is allowed to go back and forth between the topics as needed and to ask follow-up questions.

The influence of leader democracy on party strategic communication has not been explored yet. However, leader democracy and the closely connected question of charismatic leadership remain highly relevant in current public discourse. The main objective of the study is to explore how a traditional political party responds to the present-day popular demand for charismatic leadership in its communication strategy. Therefore, the first research question is following:

- 1) *How do party voters, party members and the party elite perceive leader democracy in the political communication and political management of their party?*

To gather answers to this question, interview questions were formulated based on the four values of competition in (plebiscitary) leader democracy by Illés and Körösényi (2022)

– Peaceful Conflict-Resolution, Meritocratic Selection, Integration and Repoliticization. The four values provide concrete criteria based on which party elite, members and voters can evaluate leaders.

The current party leader Friedrich Merz displays some plebiscitary leader characteristics within his party due to the plebiscitarian mandate given by the majority of all party members. The characteristics are accentuated by his communication strategy, which highlights his individual leadership style (see subchapter 2.2.3). Since Merz displays traits of charismatic or plebiscitary leadership and is a possible chancellor candidate in the 2025 federal election, the interview questions will be mainly inquiring about his performance as a party leader so far. The focus on Friedrich Merz's performance gives the respondents a concrete, practical topic from which they can effortlessly develop their further reflections, comparisons, or notes.

To further explore the communication of the leader, brand personality is a helpful tool. Brand personality dimensions allow researchers to identify and categorize the perceptions of the leader. The individual leader does not only serve as a heuristic device for voters, but to a certain extent also to party members. Consequently, the second research question is as follows:

*2) How do party voters, party members and party elite perceive the connection between the brand personality of the party leader and the brand personality of the party?*

Friedrich Merz will remain the focus, since his election initiated a broader process of reinventing the political brand of the party, in accordance with the perspective of Cross and Pilet (2015). To investigate brand personality, Smith's (2009) six dimensions for political branding will be used: honesty, image, leadership, spirited, toughness, and uniqueness. It is expected that respondents may compare Merz to his predecessors. According to media accounts (see chapters 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3), there might be similarities in the brand

personalities of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Armin Laschet, who both seem to have accented dimensions of “honesty” and “spirited”. In contrast, the personal brand of Friedrich Merz seems to have a prominent dimension of “toughness”. All three party leaders have projected the dimension of “leadership” to some extent.

Political charisma as defined by Pappas (2006) as “a situation in which followers ascribe extraordinary power and competence to their leader while staying exceptionally loyal to them” will be used as a supporting concept. Due to the limited scope of the study and the particularly negative connotations explicit terms “charismatic leader” and “follower loyalty” have in Germany, there are no interview questions directly inquiring about political charisma. Instead, indicators of political charisma may be found throughout the respondents’ answers regarding the four competition criteria of leader democracy and brand personality dimensions. The respondents may also choose to use and define the term political charisma on their own terms, which will be noted.

After a thorough evaluation of research questions 1 and 2, respondents' answers will be examined once more for evidence of the CDU's current strategic communication practices. Concrete evidence on how the party addresses the topics of leader democracy and leader and party branding will be integrated into communication models and schemes, with particular attention given to any unexpected findings. The resulting schemes will then be compared with relevant literature and used as a foundation to address the third research question:

3) *What are the implications of these perceptions for traditional political parties and their political management?*

The final research question seeks to formulate specific strategic communication recommendations for traditional, established political parties facing challenges from new movements that capitalize on charismatic leadership.

### **3.1 Operationalization**

The interview guide is divided into five thematic areas based on the four aspects of competition in plebiscitary leader democracy (Illés & Körösi, 2022) and political brand personality (Smith, 2009). Several questions are stipulated for each thematic area. For each of the five areas of the interview guide, keywords that are likely to appear in the responses were predicted based on media and academic discourse on the topics. The interview transcript will be searched for the specific keywords in the first round of open coding. The list of keywords is a tool to help categorize responses and will be expanded if unexpected patterns appear in the answers (Bryman, 2012, p. 569). Therefore, the keywords below do not represent whole codes but rather components from which more complex codes will be created. The codes are later combined into higher order, more abstract codes to help sufficiently analyze results and recognize relationships between phenomena (ibid., p. 577).

The interview guide is following:

#### **1) Peaceful Conflict-Resolution**

- How does the leader's communication style contribute to resolving conflicts within the party?
- Can you provide examples of how the leader was able to present a united front during internal party disputes?
- How does the leader's communication style approach existing conflicts within society?

KEYWORDS: understanding, listening, mutual, together, reconcile, connect, solution, hope, future, constructive

#### **2) Meritocratic Selection**

- What merits do you think are crucial for a party leader?
- How does the leader's image and communication towards the party members reflect their qualifications for the role?

- How does the leader's public image and communication towards the voters reflect their qualifications for the role?

KEYWORDS: skill, qualification, merit, excellence, prestige, experience, success, award, education, career

### **3) Integration**

- How does the leader's communication incorporate the diverse voices and interests within the party?
- Can you describe how the leader's messaging works to unify the party's various factions and supporters?
- Can you describe how the leader's messaging works to reach different voter groups?

KEYWORDS: unity, diversity, group, wing, federal state, social, conservative, liberal, young, old, women, men, children, family, community, business, city, country, identity, east, west

### **4) Repoliticization**

- How does the leader bring attention to neglected political issues?
- How has the leader communicated to define new political opponents?
- In what ways has the leader's personal brand been leveraged to reinvigorate the party's political agenda?

KEYWORDS: distinguish, define, boundary, priority, competition, identity, offer, ideology, enemy, ally, fight

### **5) Branding, brand personality**

- How would you describe the brand personality of the party leader?
- How would you describe the brand personality of our party?

KEYWORDS:



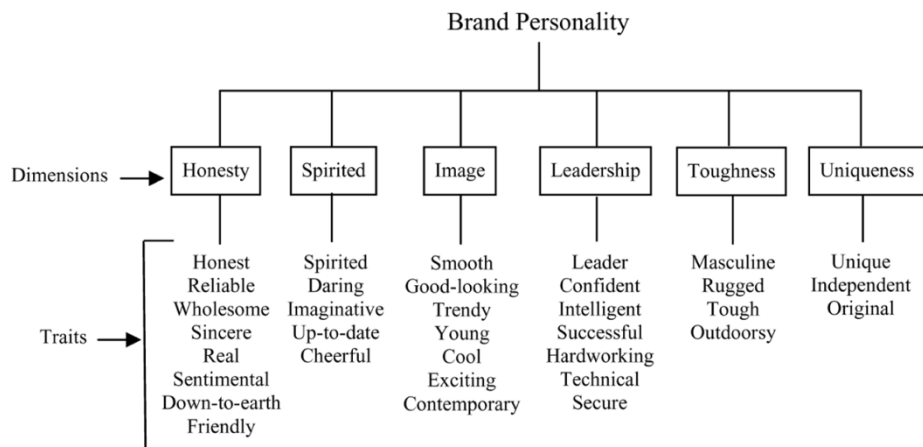


Fig. 4 – Brand personality dimensions and related traits by Smith (2009, p. 220) will be used as keywords.

- In what ways do you think the party leader’s personality traits align with the party’s brand?
- How has our party’s brand personality evolved in recent years, and what role has the party leader played in that evolution?

KEYWORDS: contrast, difference, disparity, dissimilarity, similarity, compatibility, amplify, emphasize, promote, embody, harmony, correspond

The relationships between codes emerging from the five thematic areas of the interview guide will be closely analyzed, with a particular focus on patterns that illustrate the CDU’s communication practices. The analysis will concentrate on the CDU’s current approach to the operationalized concepts of leader democracy and leader and party branding. As discussed in Chapter 3, communication models will be developed based on new findings. These models will then be compared with existing literature. The goal is to formulate strategic communication recommendations for traditional political parties seeking to remain competitive, especially against new political movements that are often highly personalized and capitalize on charismatic leadership.

Speaker	Supporter 1	Supporter 2	Member 1
<b>MERITOCRACY</b>			
codes German	Charisma - besser geworden, aber noch nicht charismatisch, nahbarer, menschlicher, Selbstironie (X Erwartungen) Führungsstärke - zu wenig, fehlen klare Positionen (X Erwartungen), Offenheit ja, z.B. ggü. Merkel-Menschen	holt sich die richtigen Leute = Managerkompetenz, spricht unangenehme Dinge klar an / kann nicht vereinigen / erfolgreich / nah an den Problemen der Menschen / gibt klare Antworten zu den entscheidenden Fragen / muss nicht von allen geliebt werden	Führungsstärke (gleichen Kurs fahren) / besser geworden - sinnvollere Aussagen dann treffen, wenn es Sinn macht
codes English	down-to-earth, sincere, spirited, confident, real, excellence - rhetoric, success - business, improved performance, good listener	managerial competence, clarity, success, down-to-earth, secure, authentic	leadership, secure, improvement
<b>PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION</b>			
codes German	cool bleiben, nicht auf Konflikte eingehen, Souveränität (X Vorwürfe - implusiv), Selbstbewusstsein / alle in der CDU haben sich gut mit dem Sieg von Merz arrangiert / Konfontativ ja, ggü. politischen Gegnern, nicht gegen gesellschaftlichen Schichten	Direktwahl des PV - Teilhabe, Dazugehören, etwas bewirken können, stärkeres Mandat / haut auf den Tisch / Merkel-Lager vllt ausgegrenzt	er haut auf den Tisch / Entscheidung der Basis muss respektiert werden / nicht viel Widerspruch in der Partei / Frieden in der Partei / er hat zur Verrohung der Gesellschaft beigetragen

Fig. 5 – An example of response coding in English followed by subsequent coding in German, categorized by respondent and topic, source: author’s archive.

Interviewer

Könntest du vielleicht etwas dazu sagen, wie er es mit seinen Botschaften, also der Fokus ist schon die Kommunikation, wie oder ob er das doch versucht, die Partei zu vereinen oder die ganze Partei anzusprechen?

Party member 1

Ja, also wenn er z.B. eine Bundestagsrede hält, da habe ich das z.B. von ihm noch nicht gesehen, also Bundestagsreden, da ist er auch mal lauter geworden, aber das war dann meistens eher typische Oppositionspolitik, schießen gegen die aktuelle Regierung. Das habe ich so wahrgenommen, zumindest dieses Abdriften ins Unsachliche, sage ich jetzt einfach mal sogar das siehst du halt bei ihm gerade in diesen lockeren Formaten oder halt also Talkshows oder Zeit, nicht nur Zeitungsinteresse, sagen wir Fernsehinterview, da wo er spontan gefragt ist, glaube ich, also versuche ich mal so als Muster festzumachen, weil eine Bundestagsrede, die ist halt vorher fünfmal von den Referenten im Abgeordnetenbüro durchkorrigiert worden, da wird halt aufs Wording genau geachtet und bei einer Talkshow muss halt, oder beim Fernsehinterview muss halt spontan reagiert werden. Und ich glaube, diese ganzen Phrasen auch hier, was hatten wir hier mit den Flüchtlingen, die sich hier in Deutschland die Zähne machen und so, das war ja auch auf irgendeinem Festzelt, auf einer Festzeltbühne.

Party member 1

Ja, also ich glaube, wenn er ein bisschen mehr Vorbereitungszeit hat, dann schafft er es dann immer doch ganz gut.

Fig. 6 – Example of the first round of coding of an interview transcript in German, source: author's archive.

### 3.2 Respondents

Three stakeholder/respondent groups in party leader selection have been defined based on Hazan and Rahat (2010), who identify possible party leader selectorates, and Hughes and Dann (2009), who identify stakeholder groups in political marketing. The stakeholder groups in party leader selection consist of people who are directly invested in the party and its success, excluding broader public stakeholder groups such as media or lobby groups.

The used sampling method is a mixture of stratified purposive sampling due to selecting individuals within subgroups of interest, i.e. the defined stakeholder groups (Bryman, 2012, p. 419) and of opportunistic sampling, capitalizing on unforeseen opportunities to collect data from certain individuals (ibid., p. 419). Opportunistic sampling was used as a working

solution for the main issue of interviewing politicians and political professionals as found by Goldstein (2002) – securing an interview date with the respondent.

The stakeholder-respondent groups are defined as following:

- 1) **Party supporter** – has voted for the CDU before and self-identifies with the party. They do not hold nor run for any political office and are not actively involved in any party activities. They might still be a “sleeping” member or might have worked for the party in the past. They follow German politics and the CDU regularly.
  
- 2) **Party member** – an active member of the CDU who either holds an elected office and/or works for the party professionally, is involved in election campaigns or personally runs for office. The distinction of “party member” from “party supporter” centers involvement in internal party affairs rather than mere party membership. It is partly based on Neu (2017) who stresses the role of modern CDU members as individuals with the ambition to run for office, distinguishing themselves from traditional supporters and “sleeping members”.
  
- 3) **Party elite** – a CDU member who is either:
  - a member of the federal party board
  - and/or a member of the federal parliamentary group board
  - and/or member of a federal state party board

The respondents did not agree to have particular personal data such as age, gender, region, position, and length of party membership directly assigned to them. Therefore, besides stakeholder group membership, no further distinction of the respondents will be provided to grant confidentiality. However, it is possible to summarize the demographics of the respondents in an aggregated format:

<b>respondents total</b>	8
<b>stakeholder group</b>	2 supporters (= inactive members), 4 members, 2 elite members
<b>gender</b>	2 women, 6 men
<b>region</b>	4 from Berlin, 2 from East Germany, 2 from North Rhine-Westphalia
<b>age range</b>	25 - 47
<b>CDU membership</b>	all respondents have been members for 4+ years

In total, eight interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted from May 2024 to July 2024 as video calls via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were conducted in German and took approximately 60 minutes each. Due to the sensitive nature of the responses, the interview transcripts will not be published to ensure the respondents' anonymity. However, the audio recordings and the transcripts are saved in the author's archive and may be made partially available upon special request. The transcripts and codes are stored according to the respondent's stakeholder group and number, following the chronological order of the interviews (e.g., Supporter 1-2, Member 1-4, Elite 1-2).

### **3.3 Limitations**

Interviews generally have several limitations, the most obvious one being the fact that the respondents have no obligation to be objective or answer truthfully (Berry, 2022, p. 680). Rather than necessarily striving to expose the respondent's most personal thoughts on a subject, an interview has the potential to discover the respondent's own abstract categories and systems in which they think about the subject matter. The interview questions and the design should recognize this reality (Lamont & Swidler, p. 161).

Another limitation (*ibid.*, p. 162) of this data collection technique is its tendency to emphasize individual perspectives, which can lead the researcher toward methodological individualism as the main explanation. In interview-based studies, explanations of outcomes may often center around individual attributes such as age and gender rather than considering broader systemic or relational factors. Thirdly, Lamont and Swidler (pp. 161-162) find that interviews tend to encourage coherence in respondents' narratives and worldviews. Consequently, relying solely on interviews can create an image of an individual experience that is deceptively coherent, with less contradiction and unpredictability than real lives typically encompass.

While discussing current party politics at the top level, sensitivity of the matter and confidentiality can be major concerns of the respondents, potentially leading to reservations about answering the questions. This issue can be deepened by conducting the interviews online, which tends to be perceived as less personal and potentially less confidential than talking to the respondent in person. Three measures have been taken to counter potential concerns and reservations of respondents. Firstly, the respondents were familiarized with strict rules of anonymization and permanent confidentiality of the transcripts (see 3.2) both in the initial interview request as well as in the beginning of each interview. Secondly, the interviews were conducted in the respondents' native language, rendering them more comfortable and confident. Thirdly, a rapport had been established with each respondent prior to the interview.

Bryman (2012, p. 218) – and especially Leech (2002, pp. 665-666) in the context of elite interviewing – stress the importance of rapport with the interviewee. According to Leech (*ibid.*, 656), the interviewer must appear trustworthy and knowledgeable about the discussed subject with the “highly placed” respondent, so that they do not feel as if they are wasting their time speaking to them. At the same time, the interviewer should appear clearly less knowledgeable than the interviewee, as each respondent in an elite interview should be treated as an expert in their field. Indeed, all respondents in this study are real experts on CDU party politics from their own stakeholder perspective.

Politicians and political professionals tend to have particularly busy schedules and according to Goldstein (2002), “getting the interview” is sometimes the skill most crucial to success in this field of research. For that reason, it was key to have met the respondents personally in the past in a different context while working for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The job position of the interviewer and a previous personal encounters assured both trustworthiness and knowledgeability (Leech, 2002) in the eyes of the respondents, who generally showed openness when approached with an interview request. Simultaneously, excessive rapport with the respondents would have negative effects on the validity and reliability of the data (Bryman, 2012, p. 218; Leech, 2002, p. 665). For this reason, only individuals with whom the interviewer has previously only had brief and limited interactions were deemed suitable. Furthermore, perceived practical distance was ensured by the fact that the interviewer comes from and lives in a different country and therefore remains an outside observer to CDU party politics.

Another limitation is posed by the cultural and historical context in Germany, which has experienced two dictatorships in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly the Nazi past causes a large proportion of the German public to have strong reservations and sensitivities about the concepts of individual leadership, leader democracy and charismatic leadership (Pakulski & Higley, 2008). While conducting the interview, it is important to strictly use terms which are currently deemed acceptable and commonly used by the German cultural mainstream. Respondents are free to introduce and define concepts such as “charismatic leadership” on their own terms, and the interviewer must remain receptive to both positive and negative connotations the respondents may assign to them.

The fact that the interviews are conducted in German may raise concerns about the accuracy of translation into English. This risk is a tradeoff done in favor of maximum richness of expression of the respondents. The first round of open coding of the transcripts is done in German, which is intended to limit the loss of context and information from original data through translation of the entire interview transcript. After all transcripts had gone through

the first round of open coding, the codes are then compared to the English keywords (components of future codes) stemming from the theoretical framework. By means of the comparison, more abstract and complex codes in English are developed and applied across all interviews.

A practical limitation of Smith's (2009) and Žižlavský and Eibl's (2011) frameworks for brand personality dimensions is their operationalization for British and Czech politics. However, given the relative cultural proximity of these European countries (especially Czechia) to Germany, it is plausible to expect that the dimensions may apply. This assumption is supported by the fact that Žižlavský and Eibl (2011) only removed the sixth dimension of "uniqueness" while adjusting the British framework to Czech politics, implying that the remaining five dimensions do not differ significantly between the two countries.

Finally, a crucial limitation of the qualitative study is the fact that it is not representative and its results cannot be generalized in any way. However, the study offers a unique perspective into the strategic communication of a relevant political party. Its main objective is to explore the subject matter and discover possible new directions for further research.

#### **4. Results**

The following chapter presents the results of eight semi-structured interviews conducted with party supporters, party members and members of the party elite. Subchapter 4.1 presents and organizes the unexpected outcomes from the interviews into schemes. The remaining results are categorized in following subchapters with respect to the four values of competition according to Illés and Körösényi (2022): meritocracy, peaceful conflict-resolution, integration and repoliticization, and brand personality dimensions according to Smith (2009).



## **4.1 Key part of leader communication strategy: Secretary General**

The most significant outcome of the interviews unexpectedly pertains not to the party leader but to the party secretary general Carsten Linnemann. Each of the respondents chose to speak about Linnemann at length when asked about the communication of the party leader, even though the secretary general was not mentioned or implied by the interviewer at any time. All respondents clearly described Linnemann's role both in communicating on the outside and on the inside of the party.

Six interviewees across stakeholder groups praised Friedrich Merz's appointment of Linnemann as a strategic managerial decision. They consider the timing of the appointment in 2023 (two years before the federal elections) particularly apt. All eight respondents, regardless of their differing opinions of Merz, lauded the party leader's ability to "put together a good team" which can work in a productive, constructive, and focused manner. Linnemann seems to be the most prominent example of Merz's personal management. Six respondents directly connect improvements in the communication of the party leader to the appointment of Linnemann as secretary general.

According to the respondents, the party leader communicates with the public in a more focused, controlled, and calm manner ever since Linnemann assumed office. The explanation presented by the respondents is that Linnemann takes on the public role of a more provocative, radical, and ideological speaker. He makes controversial statements and criticizes political rivals harshly for example on television "so that Merz does not have to do it himself anymore". This should allow Merz to focus on positioning himself as future chancellor candidate, accentuating statesmanship, restraint and consensus. The collaborative positioning of both key party players coincides with the approaching general election and the transition from the main opposition party to an expected chancellor party, which is explored in the following subchapters.

Linnemann also assumes a very active role as a communicator with the party members. A party member described frequent online meetings, in which Linnemann discussed all policy and program points of the party in depth with all candidates before the European elections in June 2024. The remaining three party members also consider Linnemann exceptionally involved, approachable and innovative. They describe how the secretary general implements many modern tools such as podcasts, member opinion polls and online discussions. This serves to 1. keep the members up to date on the party line 2. give the members frequent options to participate and share their point of view. Consequently, the party leader is not required to attend to the party's rank-and-file as often. Instead, he can focus his communication on the party elite. Furthermore, the party leader prioritizes communication with the public, which gives him more attention compared to the secretary general by the virtue of his possible chancellorship.

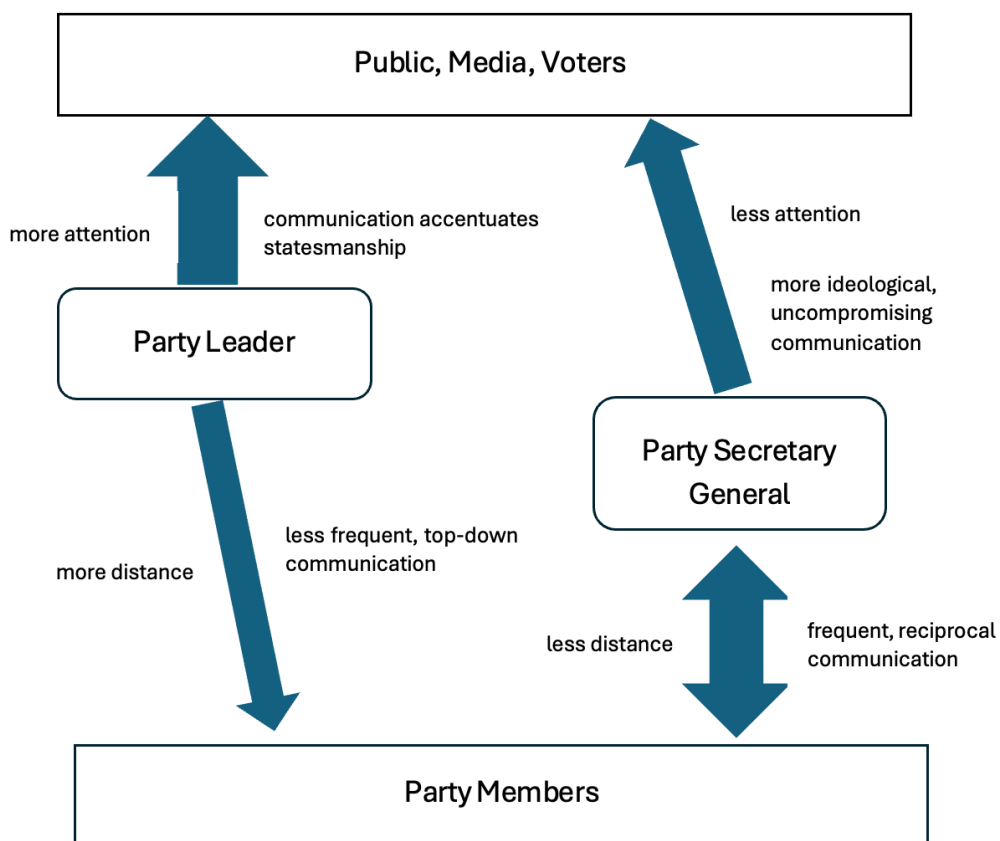


Fig. 7 – Communication scheme of Party Leader and Party Secretary General (based on the interview results), source: author’s archive.

Open, reciprocal and frequent communication with members seems to be the main feature that Carsten Linnemann projects towards his fellow party members as a secretary general. Since secretary general is a distinct party office, communication with members may even be considered a brand personality trait in terms of intra-party branding.

Many other personality traits which respondents connected to Linnemann’s brand can be connected to the “image” and “spirited” brand personality dimensions. Linnemann was most frequently described as young and further connected to optimism, excitement, progress and new, innovative concepts. According to some respondents, he possesses coolness and charm. He is also considered more popular with women than Friedrich Merz. “Leadership” (codes hands-on, involved, radical, identification figure) may be considered a third prominent brand personality dimension of Carsten Linnemann’s personal brand. Conversely, no significant evidence of brand dimensions “honesty”, “toughness” and “uniqueness” was found in the interview responses.

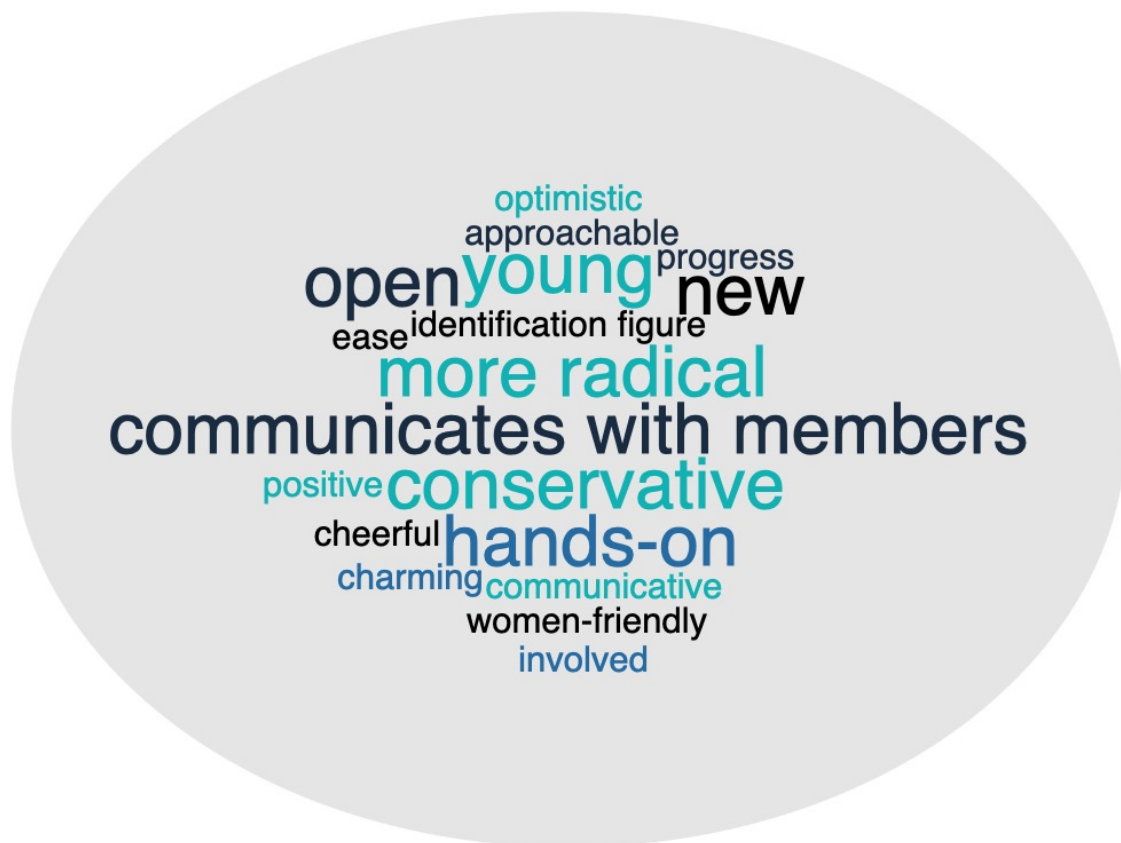


Fig. 8 – Brand personality traits of secretary general Carsten Linnemann (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

The prominent brand personality dimensions of the secretary general Linnemann “image”, “spirited” and “leadership” indicate a co-branding relationship in which Linnemann’s brand compensates for some weaknesses of the party leader’s personal brand. As seen in subchapter 4.6, Friedrich Merz seems to completely lack the brand personality dimension “image”. In fact, four respondents explicitly acknowledged the existence of such co-branding. According to representatives of all three stakeholder groups, Linnemann helps Merz appear more sympathetic and charming.

A member of the party elite acknowledged a conscious effort behind a co-branding strategy within the party elite which is meant to compliment (or supplement) the party leader’s personal brand. Other responses show that Linnemann and Merz seem to influence each

other's personal brands. Both also operate in a co-branding relationship with the party brand. In the scheme, the party is represented by both Merz and Linnemann while they simultaneously take on the brand personality traits of the party.

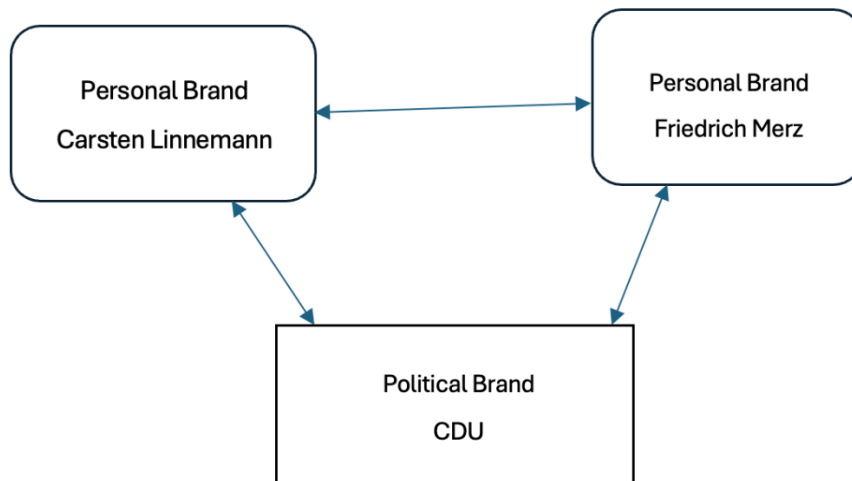


Fig. 9 – mutual co-branding relationship of the personal brands and the party brand, (based on the interview results), source: author's archive.

According to Hughes (2007), co-branding is a frequently employed strategy in political marketing. The most common combination of co-brands, though by no means the only one, is a party and a party leader. In the constellation of CDU, Merz and Linnemann, a relationship of two personal brands and a party brand can be observed.

A potential advantage of co-branding is that it may be easier to influence brand perception by associating it with another brand, rather than solely trying to reinvent the original brand. This advantage was suggested by a member of the party elite and by two other respondents. According to them, the personal brand of Friedrich Merz, including its negative traits, has been established for too long, making significant change of public perception difficult. Instead, decentralized personalization as described by Balmas et al. (2014) can be used to introduce another co-brand, potentially enhancing the perception of both the party and its leader.

Nevertheless, it is important to clarify the type of decentralized personalization conducted by the secretary general. A secretary general is often seen as one of the closest confidants of the party leader (Ferstl, 2018), which is especially the case of Carsten Linnemann (MDR.de, 2023). This means that Linnemann does not act as a potential competitor of the party leader the way a prominent vice-chairman, minister or federal state leader typically would. The unique nature the secretary general's office promises loyalty and communication exclusively in the interest of the party leader's personal brand.

## **4.2 Undisputable merits, working on perception**

The respondents expressed highly convergent judgements of Friedrich Merz's merits. Most frequently mentioned was his successful career in business, which on one hand should grant expert competence in of economic policy, on the other hand may act as a source of other positive qualities of the politician, such as managerial competence. According to one party elite respondent, Merz's success and wealth indicates that the party leader re-entered politics for altruistic, not economic or power-seeking motives. Two party members and one party supporter suggest that success outside of politics grants Merz better knowledge of "real-life" issues of business owners and employees, distinguishing him from politicians of the government coalition.

Furthermore, Merz's rhetorical ability was emphasized by the majority of respondents, calling him "one of the best public speakers in German politics" or "in the Bundestag". The significance of this skill aligns with the findings of Illés and Körösi (2022, p. 434), who assert that rhetorical ability continues to be a key meritocratic criterion of competition, even when polarization and loyalty overshadow most other qualifications and qualities.



Fig. 10 – Merits of party leader Friedrich Merz (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

In the interview responses, we can distinguish between two kinds of competence the respondents highlighted both as general requirements as well as merits of the party leader: expert and managerial competence. Expert competence encompasses hard skills and knowledge of policy fields such as economics and law. Managerial competence however seems to be an even more important merit of the party leader. While speaking of their ideal party leadership, all respondents referred to the ability to seek advice and choose the best possible advisors. As already mentioned in subchapter 4.1, even respondents critical of Merz praised his political management skills. Most respondents also supported the claim that Merz is open to advice and differing opinions, though one party supporter doubted his openness to criticism.

Other leader merits that the respondents assigned to Merz include leadership, clarity, authenticity and self-security. One quality was mentioned more often than others – being a good listener while speaking with the voters or party members. Most interviewees asserted that Friedrich Merz carefully listens to many different perspectives before making a decision. Two respondents mentioned that they could imagine having Friedrich Merz “as a neighbor”. Five respondents in total consider him to be down-to-earth, even though it does not correspond with his public image.

Seven out of eight respondents also listed negative character traits of the CDU leader – mainly impulsiveness and coming across as cold and arrogant. Nonetheless, an equally prominent topic was their apparent change for the better. Six respondents stress significant improvement in the performance of Friedrich Merz as a party leader. Overall, they claim that he has been intensely working on perceived negative traits. They find that present-day Merz appears more “human, fun and relaxed”, while also communicating in a more calm and controlled manner. Indeed, Kain (2024) shows that Friedrich Merz is becoming more popular with the public. In all six cases, the respondents connected the improvement to the appointment of secretary general Carsten Linnemann.

The merit of political charisma was explicitly addressed by three respondents. Two mentioned it in a positive context and defined it as “humor, approachability, humanity” and “a natural charm that inspires loyalty, enthusiasm and interest in the person, not their positions.” By their definitions, neither consider Friedrich Merz to be charismatic, though one of the two respondents sees Merz as “working towards some charisma, but he will never be truly charismatic”. The third respondent mentioned charisma in a negative context – as something dangerous, attributing it to an extreme-left leader Sahra Wagenknecht.

### **4.3 Peace and quiet within the party, polarized society**

Interviews with party members and supporters provided strong evidence of the party leader's peaceful conflict-resolution. However, this statement must be limited to peaceful conflict-



resolution within the party itself. Members of the two stakeholder groups claim the party is the calmest it has been since the final years of Angela Merkel’s rule. The respondents claim that Friedrich Merz achieved this by 1) staying calm when faced with confrontation, 2) giving some space and voice to people with differing opinions, 3) solving disagreements in a discrete, confidential manner, 4) seeking a broad consensus across his supporters and non-supporters. One party member and one party supporter expressed some doubt about the opponents of Merz within the party being truly content with the current situation, although they agree that the party clearly seems to be in a peaceful state.

Both members of the party elite offered alternative views. One does not attribute peace within the party to the party leader. Rather, they think it was a conscious decision of the “team Merkel” to not express any discontent, give space to the new leadership and wait for the results. The other member of the party elite does not consider the party to be peaceful. Instead, they find that there is plenty of internal conflict, especially members attacking and publicly criticizing their fellows and the party leadership, which they find destructive.



Fig. 11 – Peaceful conflict-resolution within the party (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

The interviews suggest a stark contrast between the role Friedrich Merz plays within the party and the one he plays within society. Though most respondents see the party leader as an important player in reconciling the different “teams” within the party, they consider him polarizing among voters. Three party members explicitly stated that Merz had personally contributed to the polarization of the society and the coarsening of political discourse. Most respondents emphasized that uncompromising statements and direct confrontation were part of his communication style. Most respondents also assume Merz will always remain somewhat polarizing by the virtue of his clear political positions and image. Nevertheless, some respondents point out a decrease in polarizing statements and behaviors in the past year which they connect to the general improvement of the party leader’s communication, the secretary general and the approaching general elections. Presently, they find that Merz first takes a step back when a society-wide controversy arises.



Fig. 12 – Peaceful conflict-resolution within society (codes according to frequency), source: author's archive.

#### **4.4 The party is integrated. Are voters next?**

Six respondents across all stakeholder groups consider the party deeply integrated. An elite member and a party supporter went so far as to criticize Merz for exaggerating his integration efforts, falsely prioritizing consensus over clarity. Party members and party elite members find the main driving force behind the integration to be the basic principle program (Grundsatzprogramm), whereas the party supporters, who were not actively involved in its creation, did not mention it. The comprehensive process, which was decided by Friedrich Merz and overseen by Carsten Linnemann, opened the doors to all interested members and invited them to polls, discussions and conferences. The members were able to share their opinion and the objective was to reach a broad consensus. Three party members and one elite member stated that the Grundsatzprogramm created an important “substantive, policy focused” directive for all politically active members. Such directive would assure coherence among different regions and interest groups that the CDU unites.

Two active party members who initially considered themselves very critical of Merz claim to identify with virtually 100 % of the final version of the Grundsatzprogramm. One party member expressed the opinion that facts were the foundation of an intra-party consensus. They find that as long as the party leader's statements are founded in objective reality, party members would stand behind them. Conversely, three party members said that the leader's statements based on “feelings” that are “factually incorrect” were the main factor detrimental to party integration. Such statements would catch many members by surprise and cause disappointment. On the other hand, one party supporter and one member of the party elite approved of controversial, emotional statements with no direct empirical support, claiming that “saying what the people feel” was welcomed by many members and voters alike.



Rhine-Westphalia and former east Germany, which is considered more socially conservative compared to the “old federal states”. However, an elite party member and two party members emphasized that, due to the Grundsatzprogramm, the party now appeals to a much more diverse population than the party leader alone could, remaining true to its People's Party (Volkspartei) character.

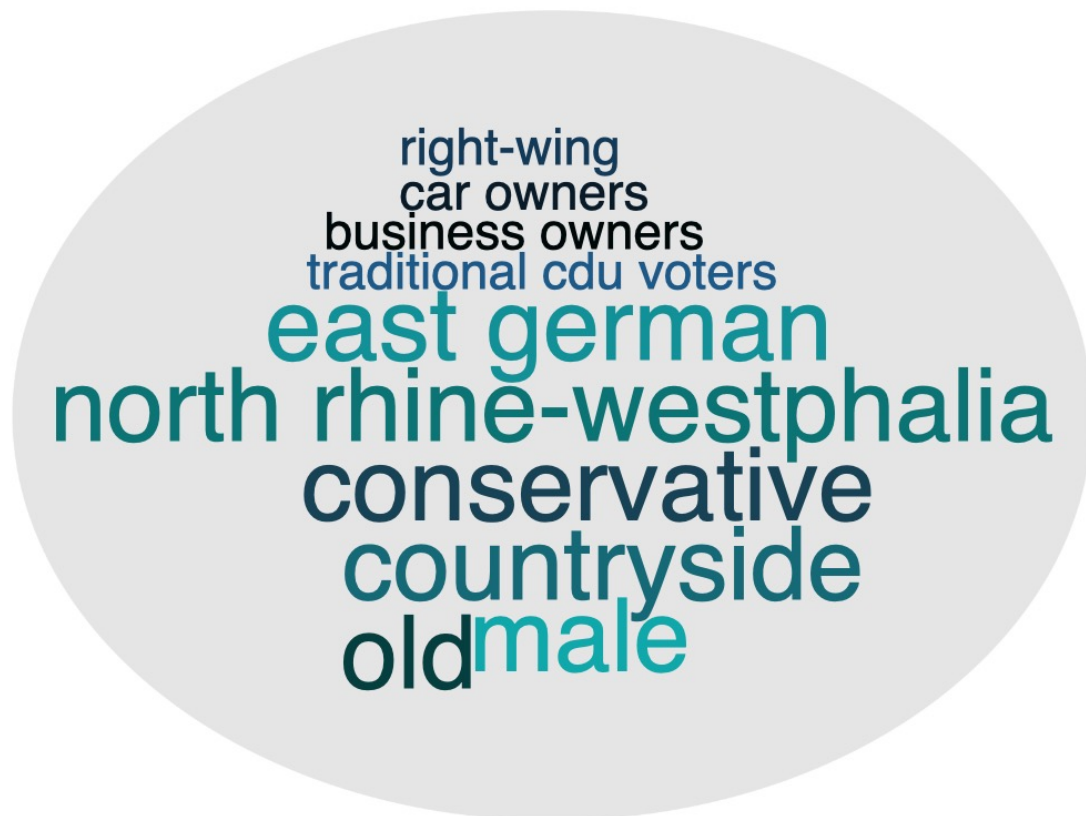


Fig. 14 – Supporters of Friedrich Merz among voters (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

Conversely, most respondents across stakeholder groups clearly pinpointed voters which have reservations about the party leader: women, especially young women, and people living in large cities. Additionally, people with a migration background, members of the LGBT community and generally voters partial to more left-wing and green ideology were considered opponents of Merz.

Though respondents had corresponding ideas about which demographic groups are no Merz supporters, they had differing proposals for solutions. While two party members would propose focusing on policy issues that are more associated with leftist and green politicians, the elite party members had the exact opposite view. One claimed that “there is nothing the CDU can gain from trying to be left and green like the other parties.” The other elite member stressed that the CDU is right to prioritize its own original policies, which are an attractive offer for many different demographic groups. The latter view was echoed by another party member. One party supporter stated that the lack of support from young women might be the biggest issue of Friedrich Merz in terms of voter demographics. However, they were not sure if this issue could be fixed at all.



Fig. 15 – Opponents of Friedrich Merz among voters (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

## 4.5 Staunch repoliticization meets government ambition

Although the topic of repoliticization generated the most diverse set of codes due to its complexity and breadth, it appears to be the aspect on which the respondents had the most similar interpretations. This is the case mainly because the CDU is currently the main opposition party on the federal level, effectively making Friedrich Merz the leader of the opposition. All respondents consider criticizing the government the main feature of opposition politics. Supporters and critics of Friedrich Merz alike admitted that he effectively rallies the party and the supporters behind his leadership, which is further proven by current poll ratings and European election results. Seven out of eight respondents stated that the striking incompetence of the current government coalition “makes it easier” in terms of repoliticization. Two respondents stressed that the party was originally expecting to remain in the opposition for two legislative periods and use this time to renew its internal functioning, program and image. Nonetheless, the “catastrophic performance” of the current government was pushing the CDU to take responsibility for the country again next year.

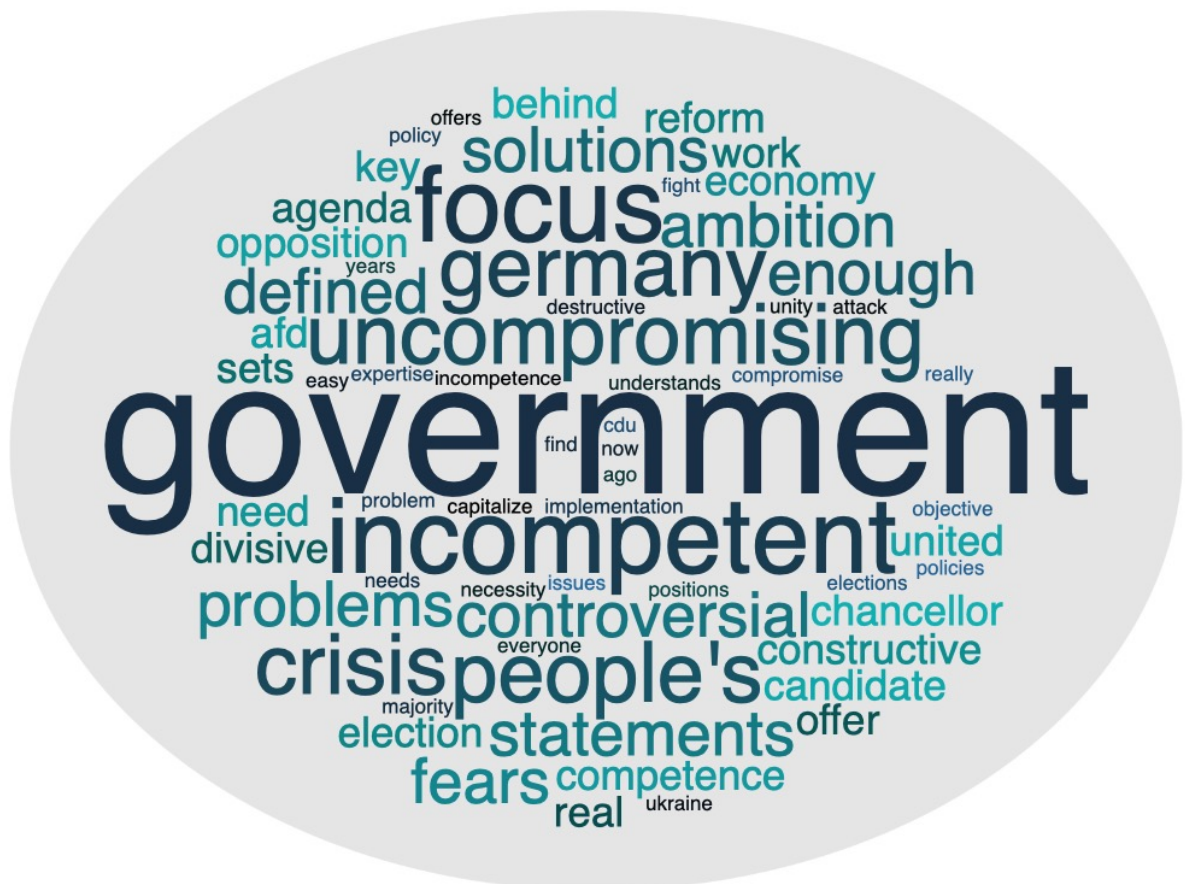


Fig. 16 – Repoliticization (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

Six respondents admitted that the CDU-led governments under Merkel had partial responsibility for many issues Germany was currently facing. Still, they consider the present-day government comparatively worse at dealing with the most prominent issues – most notably the state of the economy, followed by security and migration. Most respondents found that Germany was in a “constant state of crisis” connected to the repercussions of the 2015 refugee crisis, the covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Constant crisis management was distracting the coalition government from taking the necessary steps for long-term prosperity. Additionally, the current disunited government coalition was preoccupied with its own internal disputes.

Friedrich Merz and the CDU with its new Grundsatzprogramm are, according to the respondents, skillfully taking this opportunity to repoliticize the topics of economy, security and migration in the public discourse. Two party supporters and one member of the party elite wish Merz leveraged his competence in economics even more, as it is the key competence of the politician as the state of the economy is the main concern of the voters. However, the respondents do find that the party leader is profiting from his perception as the antithesis of Merkel, effectively distancing himself and the party from the politics of the former chancellor in the eyes of the public. Six respondents stated that the former chancellor had eventually lost touch with her party and its ideology because of years of focusing on leading the coalition government with the Social Democratic Party.

At the same time, the respondents expressed understanding for the necessary transformation from “party leader” to “government leader” which Merkel underwent. All respondents are already observing a related shift in the communication of Friedrich Merz. They find that Merz used to be far more polarizing in his statements. With the possible chancellor candidacy approaching, he is now veering towards a more consensus-oriented, statesmanlike communication. In practice, this means that he has recently avoided making inflammatory remarks about other democratic parties and their politicians, focusing strictly on criticizing



their policies without making it personal. This is understood by the party members as a tactical step serving to open the doors for possible coalition partners after the elections. As much as the CDU is aiming to win the 2025 election, the party currently cannot rely on gaining an absolute majority in the parliament.

The only parties and politicians the party leader still openly attacks are extremists on the far left and right. However, he does not alienate their voters, especially in an effort to win back some AfD supporters, as most respondents noted. All eight respondents find that the defining feature of Merz's repoliticizing communication was centering the voters' biggest fears and concerns, according to opinion polls. Three respondents which are critical of Merz admit that this strategy seems to be effective considering the current election poll ratings and results (see Discussion).

The respondents point out that the decrease in inflammatory statements regarding potential coalition partners does not imply opening of the party line to other parties. The leader and the party often communicate that until the elections, they will only pay attention to their own policy proposals. Any negotiations with other parties should take place after the elections only. The CDU seems to be prioritizing political confrontation and distinction as an antidote to the previous loss of a clear profile, caused by two consecutive coalition governments with the social democrats. Nevertheless, the respondents expect Friedrich Merz to change his political style, should he become chancellor.

#### **4.6 Brand personality: Competence is King**

One of the most frequently mentioned traits the respondents used when describing the brand personality of Friedrich Merz was competence. Since Smith (2009) does not recognize "competent" as a brand personality dimension, having transformed Aaker's 1997 dimension of "competence" into "leadership", it is best subsumed as a trait of the dimension "leadership". Other traits related to the dimension "leadership" which the respondents used to describe the party leader's brand personality were successful, intelligent, confident and

technical. The answers provide strong evidence of a pronounced brand personality dimension of “leadership”.

Another frequently listed character trait was “daring”, which Smith (2009) categorizes under “spirited”. “Daring” and “spirited” were the only appearing codes which can be subsumed under the brand personality dimension “spirited”. The third highly prominent brand personality dimension of Friedrich Merz’s personal brand was “toughness”, as “tough” was mentioned by most respondents.

There is mixed evidence for the dimension “honesty”. Merz’s personal brand was described as “down-to-earth” several times in the sense of a closeness to the people and their everyday reality. Besides, elsewhere in the interviews the leader was described as authentic and reliable several times. However, all respondents included some negative brand personality traits, most notably “arrogant”, “no empathy” and “issues with women” in their description. Though the respondents stressed that the negative public perception does not reflect the real personality of the party leader, these perceived traits work to the detriment of the brand personality dimension “honesty”, which according to Smith (2009) includes the traits such as “friendly” and “wholesome”.



Fig. 17 – Brand personality traits of Friedrich Merz (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

Thus, it can be concluded that the interviews offer strong evidence for the party leader's brand personality dimensions of "leadership," "spirited," and "tough," while the evidence for the dimension of "honesty" is mixed. On the other hand, no support for the brand personality dimensions “image” and “uniqueness” was found. One party member echoed a point made by Kain (2024): the current “Zeitgeist” or war in Europe and economic issues in Germany causes voters to prioritize competence and toughness over sympathy, friendliness and charm. This implies that Friedrich Merz’s personal brand is more popular now than in the past.



Fig. 18 – Brand personality traits of the CDU (codes according to frequency), source: author’s archive.

The respondents described the brand personality of the CDU with the codes “hardworking”, “leadership”, “responsibility” and “competent” , alluding to a strongly developed brand personality dimension of “leadership”. Furthermore, solid support for the dimension “honesty” was found in the codes “reliable” “down-to-earth” and “real”. Since the CDU is a political brand, descriptors related to ideology and policy were also found: “anti-extremist”, “conservative”, “freedom” and “values”. The respondents also gave mixed comments on the perception of the brand, with some claiming that the CDU was perceived negatively, while others stated that the CDU had become an attractive brand “again”.

Regarding the relationship of the brands Friedrich Merz and CDU, all respondents found that Merz embodied the CDU and its values. They acknowledged that to many outside observers, the party leader meant the same as the party itself. This was mostly interpreted as

positive, stating that the party can capitalize on the personality of Merz, though one respondent saw a causal relationship between the negative perception of his personal brand and the party brand. One party elite member and a party supporter expressed their belief that the party can manage its brand (such as by utilizing other personal brands) to ensure it is not adversely affected by the personal brand of its leader. Another party elite member asserted that Friedrich Merz was a “great brand for the inside of the party, much less so for the public” (quote: Elite 1).

## **5. Discussion**

The stakeholder interviews have provided insight into the role of leader democracy in the selection of the party leader and in the strategic communication of the party. They also offered some unexpected findings which mostly concern the role of the party secretary general in the party communication strategy. In this section, the author addresses the research questions posed at the outset of the study, drawing on the findings and analysis presented in previous chapters.

To begin, the first research question is addressed:

- 1) How do party voters, party members and the party elite perceive leader democracy in the political communication and political management of their party?

The findings suggest that CDU party leader Friedrich Merz performs strongly in all four competition values of plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD), as outlined by Illés and Körösnéyi (2022), in his internal party leadership. The competition values are meritocracy, peaceful conflict-resolution, integration and repoliticization. Most respondents confirm that Friedrich Merz possesses the essential merits to lead a party, has fostered peace within the party after a period of conflict and inner turmoil, pays regard to the integration and representation of different party groups, and helped define the new political agenda of the party. The results confirm the initial speculation that Friedrich Merz might display characteristics of an “intra-party plebiscitary leader” due to his popular mandate in the party

*(Friedrich Merz ist designierter CDU-Vorsitzender, CDU.de, 2021; Henkel, 2024).* Moreover, when the different stakeholders evaluated Friedrich Merz based on their own personal criteria, their evaluation seemed largely compatible with the four PLD competition values. This suggests that party politics stakeholders may have already embraced a leader democracy mindset.

All eight respondents, who can be considered party politics experts in their own right (Leech, 2002), have praised the managerial competence of the party leader, especially his HR management in the party. This highly corresponds with Lees-Marshment (2020, p. 9), who stresses the managerial responsibility of a political leader. Unexpectedly, the most prominent and most praised managerial decision of the party leader was the appointment of Carsten Linnemann as party secretary general, which is another top-level managerial position in the party. The respondents consider Linnemann a good match to Friedrich Merz, greatly enhancing the party leader's communication both with the party members and the party voters.

As expected, all respondents acknowledge the critical role of the party leader in the party's communication. This holds true even though most respondents and authors (e.g., Decker, 2022) emphasize the decentralized structure of the party, stressing that the CDU is not a one-leader party. Despite that, four respondents, all active party members, clearly articulated that to voters who do not follow politics daily, Friedrich Merz serves as a cognitive shortcut, being perceived and evaluated as a stand-in for the entire party. This observation aligns with the conclusions of Holloway and Hendrie (2023).

In a significant finding, most respondents pointed out great improvement in the communication of the party leader, which they overwhelmingly attribute to the work of the secretary general. The secretary general Linnemann maintains frequent, open, and reciprocal communication with party members, who, in turn, express a high level of appreciation for how the party's leadership interacts with them. The stakeholders also assume that Linnemann

significantly helps Merz in his outward communication, which has become more focused and deliberate.

The respondents criticized the party leader's external communication, noting his impulsive and inflammatory statements, although they recognize that these have become rare. Still, most of them consider the party leader polarizing, controversial and unpopular among the public. This leads us to examine the contrast between Merz's performance in the four PLD competition values internally within the party and in external contexts. While the respondents assert that the party leader's strength is the repoliticization, most consider him rather weak in integration and peaceful conflict-resolution of the voter masses. This mirrors the tradeoffs that Illés and Körösenyi (2022) problematize – strong repoliticization leads to polarization, which hurts integration and peaceful conflict-resolution. The respondents also indicated that the public holds a mixed perception of the party leader's merits. On one hand, he is regarded as successful, competent, and possessing strong rhetorical skills. On the other hand, he appears to lack sympathy, charm, and, according to three respondents who used the term, charisma.

Crucially, the respondents acknowledged a major difference between “party leader” and “state leader” or chancellor. While Friedrich Merz served as the leader of the opposition, repoliticization was regarded as the priority, often at the expense of other values. This is beginning to change as the CDU is poised to win the upcoming elections and lead the next government. Currently, although it remains uncertain, there is a possibility that Friedrich Merz could excel in integration and peaceful conflict resolution, should he become chancellor. Opinion polls (Kain, 2024) indicate that the party leader has become somewhat more popular with the public. The stakeholders are already observing a shift towards a more consensual, statesmanlike communication of the party leader, who wishes to become a chancellor candidate in the 2025 general elections.

The second research question addressed in this study is:

- 2) How do party voters, party members and party elite perceive the connection between the brand personality of the party leader and the brand personality of the party?

The findings indicate that the respondents collectively believe that Friedrich Merz embodies the party, its values, and its brand personality traits. However, they note that he does not and cannot encompass the entire spectrum of the CDU's brand personality traits, given the party's broad nature. Rather, Merz embodies other traits and values of the party than his predecessors, facilitating a repositioning of the party as more conservative and more right-wing on the market (Hughes, 2007). In terms of Smith's (2009) political brand personality dimensions, the party leader's personal brand projects the dimensions of "leadership", "spirited" and "toughness", while the main personality dimensions of the party brand are "leadership" and "honesty". This indicates convergence mostly in the dimension of "leadership".

The stakeholders assert that, over time, Friedrich Merz has become the face and embodiment of the party's program for many voters. They acknowledge that this development has both advantages and disadvantages. A significant portion of the public perceives the party leader as controversial, arrogant, and unsympathetic (Heckmann, 2022). His brand personality also seems to completely lack the dimension "image". Several respondents acknowledge the risk that the party leader's public perception may pose to the political brand of the party. The proposed solution of the respondents is a co-branding relationship with other personalities of the party elite, most notably the secretary general, whose brand personality seems to be strong in the dimension "image". According to the respondents (e.g., Member 1, Elite 2) the party's brand capitalizes on co-branding relationships with different personalities. Meanwhile, the party leader's personal brand capitalizes mainly on co-branding with the secretary general (respondents: Supporter 1; Members 2, 3, 4). To conclude, the respondents overall view decentralized personalization (Balmas, 2014) as an important marketing tool for both the party and the leader, especially considering the party's broad and diverse electorate, echoing Hughes and Dann (2009).



The final research question explored in the study is:

- 3) What are the implications of these perceptions for traditional political parties and their political management?

The findings indicate that traditional parties seeking to stay competitive with new movements and their charismatic leadership should consider selecting a party leader who excels in the four values of PLD competition (Illés & Körösényi, 2022). The implication aligns with the ongoing trend toward broader selectorates and intra-party democratization (Freire & Barberà, 2015), since a party leader chosen by a broad member base is more likely to excel in PLD competition values, which emphasize catering to a larger, more widespread followership.

As the case of the CDU under Friedrich Merz exemplifies, a new party leader elected in a more democratic manner can be used to present a renewed party image both towards the party members (Cross & Pilet, 2015) and towards the voters (Hughes, 2007). Moreover, a loyal party base can prove beneficial both during election campaigns and in the government (Gruber et al., 2015). A leader who excels in the four PLD competition values can be expected to successfully rally party members behind their leadership. However, it is crucial to note that while strong leader performance within the party indicates valuable attributes for the election campaign, there's no guarantee that this leadership will translate equally effectively in public perception. This is the case because the demographics of the party members may differ greatly from the general population (Klein et al., 2019).

Despite the criticism of contemporary leader democracy (Green, 2012; Scott, 2018), the shift towards it may also be understood as bringing the political discourse closer to the general population (Kane & Patapan, 2012; Illés & Körösényi, 2022). Leaders aiming for widespread follower support may reframe political communication by addressing the voters' everyday concerns, bridging the perceived gap between political elites and the general public (Castells, 2018). Indeed, Friedrich Merz appears to prioritize voters' most pressing concerns

in his communication strategy (respondents: Supporter 2; Members 1, 2, 3, 4; Elite 2). If established parties succeed in convincing voters that they are capable of addressing their concerns again, it could diminish the effectiveness of charismatic, transformative leadership of anti-establishment parties.

Furthermore, the interviews emphasize the importance of the leader's personal brand authentically aligning with the party's political brand, which is crucial for upholding credibility (Speed et al., 2015). This is especially important for traditional parties, which are linked to long-term values that “outlive” a single leader. Consequently, the relationship between the party's and the leader's brands extends beyond mere co-branding, where the party would adopt a new set of brand personality traits with each leader (ibid.). If the leader struggles to embody all brand personality dimensions of the party, lacks charisma or their brand personality has vulnerable spots, it is appropriate to employ a co-branding relationship with other personalities within the party (respondents: Supporter 1, 2; Members 1, 3, 4; Elite 2). Ideally, individuals highlighted through decentralized personalization (Balmas, 2014) should project brand personality dimensions that compensate for the deficiencies of the party leader's personal brand.

To summarize, the recommendations for the strategic communication of traditional parties and their leader are as follows:

- Leverage the broad popular mandate of a newly elected leader for programmatic and brand renewal (Cross & Pilet, 2015; Hughes, 2007).
- Prioritize continuous internal communication targeting the party's rank and file, led by a high-ranking charismatic figure (such as the CDU secretary general), ensuring member support and a unified messaging in political discussions.
- Consider co-branding with prominent, yet loyal party personalities that offset the vulnerabilities of the leader's personal brand (Hughes, 2007; Balmas, 2014).

- Emphasize PLD competition values in internal and external communication of the party leader, such as meritocracy, peaceful-conflict resolution, integration, repoliticization (Illés & Körösényi, 2022), and political charisma (Pappas, 2006).

For future research, a more in-depth examination of the transition from "party leader" to "state leader" would be informative. Specifically, pinpointing the concrete changes in political management and communication strategies that accompany a successful transition could provide valuable insights for political professionals. Additionally, exploring the co-branding relationships that leaders establish with other party figures to remain competitive would be enlightening.

Disclaimer: One factor that may have influenced data collection are the European elections, which took place in Germany on July 9, 2024, with results announced on the same day. Four interviews were conducted prior to the elections, while the remaining four took place afterward. Considering that the CDU/CSU won the elections by a large margin, the results may have bolstered the respondents' perceptions of the party leader in the post-election interviews. However, no qualitative differences between the first four interviews and the later four were identified. In fact, the European election result exactly matches the 30% that the CDU/CSU has been consistently receiving in the general election polls over several months. Thus, the victory likely did not come as a surprise to the stakeholders but rather served as confirmation of the existing trajectory.

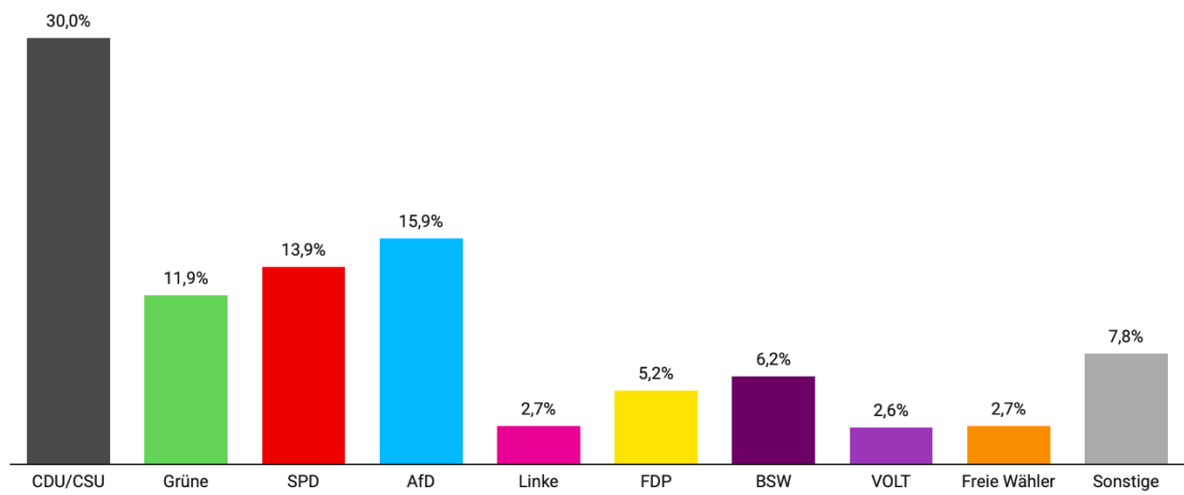


Fig. 19 – Results of the European Elections in Germany, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2024, Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (2024)

## **Conclusion**

This study explores the role of leader democracy in party leader selection and the strategic communication of traditional political parties, utilizing data from stakeholder interviews. It presents an updated concept of leader democracy as an evolution of personalized politics, incorporating intra-party democracy and political branding. Its objective is to examine the perceptions of leader democracy and leader branding held by party politics stakeholders, and to draw implications for traditional political parties. The study addresses three research questions, building on key findings regarding the German CDU and its current party leader, Friedrich Merz.

Regarding the perceptions of leader democracy shared by party voters, members, and the party elite, the findings indicate that Merz excels in the four competition values of plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD): meritocracy, peaceful conflict-resolution, integration, and repoliticization. This supports the notion that Merz possesses characteristics of an “intra-party plebiscitary leader.” While in the first half of 2024, the party leader began adjusting his communication style to position himself as a potential consensual chancellor candidate, it remains uncertain whether he can engage the public as effectively as he does within his party.

While the current party leader is generally seen as successful and competent, he is also considered polarizing, controversial and his brand personality lacks the dimensions of image and honesty as well as political charisma. The vulnerable spots of the party leader’s personal brand highlighted the need for a co-branding strategy with other party figures. Most notably, the party secretary general Carsten Linnemann stands out as a significant personal co-brand, offsetting the leader’s weak “image” dimension, and acts a key player in the party leader’s internal and external communication strategies.

Lastly, the implications for traditional political parties suggest that to remain competitive against new movements, they may select leaders who excel in the four PLD competition

values. This aligns with the trend towards intra-party democratization, as a strong internal mandate can positively reflect on outward leader performance in a campaign. Nevertheless, successful internal performance does not guarantee electoral success, necessitating careful consideration of party political management and co-branding strategies.

## **Závěr**

Tato práce zkoumá roli leader democracy při výběru stranického lídra a ve strategické komunikaci tradičních politických stran s využitím dat z rozhovorů se stakeholdery stranické politiky. Představuje aktualizované pojetí demokracie lídrů jako evoluce personalizované politiky, zahrnující vnitrostranickou demokracii a politický branding. Jejím cílem je prozkoumat, jak stakeholdeři stranické politiky vnímají leader democracy a branding lídrů, a následně vyvodit důsledky pro tradiční politické strany. Studie se zabývá třemi výzkumnými otázkami, přičemž vychází ze zjištění týkajících se německé CDU a jejího současného stranického lídra Friedricha Merze.

Co se týče vnímání leader democracy ze strany voličů, členů strany a stranické elity, zjištění ukazují, že Merz vyniká ve čtyřech hodnotách soutěže demokracie plebiscitárního lídra (PLD): meritokracie, mírové řešení konfliktů, integrace a repolitizace. To podporuje názor, že Merz disponuje charakteristikami „vnitrostranického plebiscitárního vůdce“. Ačkoliv tento stranický lídr začal v první polovině roku 2024 upravovat svůj komunikační styl tak, aby se mohl prezentovat jako potenciální konsensuální kandidát na kancléře, zůstává nejisté, zda dokáže veřejnost zaujmout stejně efektivně jako členy své strany.

Současný předseda strany Friedrich Merz je sice obecně vnímán jako úspěšný a kompetentní, ale zároveň je považován za polarizujícího, kontroverzního a jeho osobní značka postrádá dimenze „image“ a „upřímnost“, stejně tak jako politické charisma. Slabé stránky osobní značky předsedy ukázaly potřebu strategie co-brandingu s dalšími osobnostmi strany. Především generální tajemník strany Carsten Linnemann zde vystupuje jako významný osobní co-brand, který kompenzuje slabou dimenzi „image“ lídra, a také působí jako klíčový aktér v interní i externí komunikační strategii lídra strany.

Jako možný důsledek pro tradiční politické strany vyplývá, že aby si zachovaly konkurenceschopnost vůči novým hnutím, mohou si vybírat lídry, kteří vynikají ve čtyřech hodnotách soutěže PLD. To je v souladu s trendem vnitrostranické demokratizace, neboť

silný předsednický mandát se může pozitivně odrazit na vnějším výkonu lídra v kampani. Mimořádný vnitrostranický výkon nicméně úspěch ve volbách nezaručuje. Proto je nutné také pečlivé zvážení strategie politického managementu strany a jejího co-brandingu.



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**Institut komunikačních studií a žurnalistiky FSV UK**  
**Teze MAGISTERSKÉ diplomové práce**

**TUTO ČÁST VYPLŇUJE STUDENT/KA:****Příjmení a jméno diplomantky/diplomanta:**

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**Razítko podatelny:****Imatrikulační ročník diplomantky/diplomanta:**

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Došlo dne:	<b>- 8 -09- 2022</b> -1-
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**Název práce v češtině:**

Výběr lídra strany a vliv leader democracy: Příklad německé CDU

**Název práce v angličtině:**

Party Leader Selection and the Influence of Leader Democracy:

German CDU Case Study

**Předpokládaný termín dokončení** (semestr, akademický rok – vzor: ZS 2022/2023)(diplomovou práci je možné obhajovat nejdříve šest měsíců od schválení tezí)

LS 2023

**Charakteristika tématu a jeho dosavadní zpracování** (max. 1800 znaků):

Vzhledem k významu lídra v moderní politické komunikaci je výběr vhodného kandidáta jedním z klíčových prvků politického managementu interstranických procesů. Existují však různé mechanismy výběru. Současné politické strany volí různá řešení, od exkluzivního selektorátu přes stranické delegáty až po hlasování všech členů (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). Samotný zvolený způsob výběru je součástí komunikační strategie strany (Cross & Pilet, 2015). Výběr nového stranického lídra totiž mj. také představuje jedinečnou příležitost z hlediska rebrandingu či repositioningu, neboť stranám se dostává zvýšené mediální pozornosti zejména v době změny vedení (Somer-Topcu, 2017).

Téma vnitrostranického výběru lídra lze sledovat v rámci konceptu personalizace politických stran, což je poměrně dobře prozkoumaný fenomén, který se kromě mediální dimenze dělí na několik dalších typů (Balmas et al., 2014). Personalizace, neboli rostoucí význam jednotlivce, je často interpretována v souvislosti s poklesem moci politických uskupení, úbytkem členů stran a „krizí demokracie“.

Volně tak na personalizaci navazuje tzv. leader democracy, což je naopak poměrně nový teoretický koncept, který se snaží řešit vývoj v moderních demokraciích a reaguje na přirozené napětí mezi demokratickým hlasováním a rozhodováním jednotlivce (Kane & Patapan, 2012). Cross & Pilet (2015) naznačují souvislost mezi metodou výběru lídra a mírou personalizace strany, neboť demokratičtější proces výběru může posílit lídrovu roli ve straně. Koncept leader democracy by mohl nabídnout nový pohled na moderní politický branding a strategickou komunikaci strany a pomoci řešit některé současné problémy, kterým tradiční strany čelí.

Při výběru lídra strany lze identifikovat tři skupiny stakeholderů – jsou to voliči strany, řadoví členové strany a stranická elita – kterým bude v práci věnována pozornost

**Předpokládaný cíl práce, případně formulace problému, výzkumné otázky nebo hypotézy** (max. 1800 znaků):

Diplomová práce se soustředí na politickou komunikaci, protože studií zkoumajících přímo výběr lídra strany z tohoto hlediska je velmi málo. Zároveň je obecně málo praktických studií, které by pracovaly s teoretickým konceptem leader democracy. Prostředí Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung dává autorce možnost zkoumat způsoby, jakými leader democracy a jevy s ní spojené ovlivňují management a strategickou komunikaci velké demokratické strany (CDU). Jedním z přínosů práce bude propojení několika moderních teoretických konceptů v rámci výzkumu. Vzhledem k malému množství již dostupných dat

práce využije explorativní přístup.  
Text odpoví na následující tři výzkumné otázky:

- 1) Jak vnímají voliči, členové strany a stranická elita výběr stranického lídra s ohledem na politickou komunikaci a politický management?
- 2) Jaké důsledky má toto vnímání pro moderní politické strany a jejich lídry?
- 3) Jak může moderní politický management integrovat preference voličů a členů strany do výběru stranického leadera?

Práce bude psána v anglickém jazyce.

**Předpokládaná struktura práce (rozdělení do jednotlivých kapitol a podkapitol se stručnou charakteristikou jejich obsahu):**

#### 1. Úvod

#### 2. Teoretické koncepty:

- vnitrostranická demokracie, výběr lídra strany
- leader democracy
- strategická komunikace
- personalizace politiky (zejména mediální, centralizovaná)
- politický management
- politický branding

#### 3. Kontext

- dříve používané metody výběru lídrů CDU, lídři strany od roku 2018 (odchod Angely Merkel z čela strany)
- analýzy starších reforem a rebrandingu německých stran, studie míry personalizace německé politiky, německá specifika

#### 4. Cíl práce, výzkumné otázky a metodika

- cíl práce a výzkumné otázky
- kvalitativní výzkumná metoda - explorativní přístup
- polostrukturovaný rozhovor
- ~ 3-5 respondentů na skupinu stakeholderů (voliči, členové strany a stranická elita)
- otázky pro rozhovory
- + doplnění o kvantitativní data (názory členů CDU a voličů, demografická struktura členů CDU – dostupné studie)
- limity

#### 5. Analytické výstupy (odpovědi na výzkumné otázky a kritické zhodnocení)

#### 6. Diskuze a možnosti dalšího výzkumu

#### 7. Závěr

**Vymezení podkladového materiálu (např. titul periodika a analyzované období):**

- Polostrukturované rozhovory se straníky, voliči a stranickou elitou (např. delegáti, kteří v minulosti volili lídra – kontakt zprostředkovan skrze Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung)
- Studie sociální struktury německých politických stran (Klein, M.; Becker, P.; Czeczinski, L.; Lüdecke, Y.; Schmidt, B. et al.: Die Sozialstruktur der deutschen Parteimitgliedschaften. Empirische Befunde der Deutschen Parteimitgliederstudien 1998, 2009 und 2017. In: *ZParl Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, 50 (2019), Nr. 1, S. 81-98.)
- Empirická analýza členů CDU, voličů a široké populace (Neu, V. (2017). „*Ich wollte etwas bewegen.*“: *Die Mitglieder der CDU; eine empirische Analyse von Mitgliedern, Wählern und der*

**Metody (techniky) zpracování materiálu:**

- Formulace otázek do rozhovoru na základě rozpracovaných teoretických konceptů tak, aby bylo možné odpovědi respondentů zařadit do teoretického rámce
- Sběr dat formou rozhovorů do momentu teoretické saturace
- Automatický přepis rozhovorů vedených v německém jazyce, hledání konkrétních stanovisek k teoretickým konceptům (možnost otevřeného kódování), hledání nových souvislostí
- Triangulace kvalitativních dat z rozhovorů a již dostupných kvantitativních dat
- Porovnání výpovědí zástupců voličů, straníků a stranické elity
- Vyhodnocení všech dostupných dat za cílem zodpovězení výzkumných otázek

**Základní literatura** (nejméně 5 nejdůležitějších titulů k tématu a metodě jeho zpracování; u všech titulů je nutné uvést stručnou anotaci na 2–5 řádků):

Balmas, M., Rahat, G., Sheaffer, T., & Shenhav, S. R. (2014). Two routes to personalized politics: Centralized and decentralized personalization. *Party Politics*, 20(1), 37-51.

- Autoři definují dva typy politické personalizace – centralizovanou (personalizaci lídrů) a decentralizovanou (různých straníků). Oba typy je dále možné dělit na institucionální, behaviorální a mediální.

Cross, W. P., & Pilet, J. B. (Eds.). (2015). *The politics of party leadership: A cross-national perspective*. Oxford University Press.

- Tento titul představuje první obsáhlou komparaci výběrů stranických lídrů více než 100 politických stran ze 14 zemí. Zaměřuje se na faktory vedoucí ke změně metody výběru, typy zvolených lídrů či vliv změny leadershipu na volební výsledky.

Hazan, R. Y., & Rahat, G. (2010). *Democracy within parties: Candidate selection methods and their political consequences*. OUP Oxford.

- Autoři se zaměřují vnitrostranickou demokracií. Provádějí analýzu různých metod výběru kandidátů a jejich vlivu na demokracii. První část knihy vymezuje metody výběru kandidátů, druhá část analyzuje politické důsledky používání různých metod výběru.

Jain, V., Chawla, M., Ganesh, B. E., & Pich, C. (2018). Exploring and consolidating the brand personality elements of the political leader. *Spanish Journal of Marketing-ESIC*.

- Cílem této studie je prozkoumat osobnost značky a její uplatnění v politickém branding. Tato studie se zaměřuje na osobnost značky lídra indické strany BJP. Osobnostní dimenze značky, jako je upřímnost, příjemnost, kompetentnost, energie, otevřenost, svědomitost a emoční stabilita byly jasně spojeny s politickým vůdcem.

Kane, J., & Patapan, H. (2012). *The democratic leader: How democracy defines, empowers and limits its leaders*. Oxford University Press.

- Autoři tvrdí, že leadeři mají v demokraciích jedinečné postavení. Základní princip demokracie předpokládá, že lid musí vládnout. Lid však může vládnout pouze tak, že jednotlivým leaderům poskytne důvěru. To vytváří napětí, jehož výsledkem je jedinečný typ leadershipu – demokratický leadership.

Somer-Topcu, Z. (2017). Agree or disagree: How do party leader changes affect the distribution of voters' perceptions. *Party Politics*, 23(1), 66-75.

- Lídři politických stran patří k nejvlivnějším aktérům v parlamentních demokraciích a změna ve vedení strany je pro stranickou organizaci důležitou událostí. Na základě údajů ze sedmi západoevropských demokracií studie ukazuje, že změny lídra pomáhají stranám snižovat neshody voličů ohledně politických postojů strany. Tento efekt je silnější, pokud nový lídr mění politické pozice strany.

Voženílková, M. (2018). *Personalizace politiky v České republice* (Vol. 69). Masarykova univerzita.

- Od 60. let 20. století dochází v důsledku individualizace společnosti, erozi tradičních konfliktních linií a rozvoje moderních médií k oslabování politických stran a posilování jednotlivců. Kniha představuje první český pohled na teorii personalizace politiky. Analýzou parlamentních voleb (2002–2013) zjišťuje, zda je česká politika personalizovaná.

**Diplomové a disertační práce k tématu** (seznam bakalářských, magisterských a doktorských prací, které byly k tématu obhájeny na UK, případně dalších oborově blízkých fakultách či vysokých školách za posledních pět let)

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ŠTOSOVÁ, Tereza. *Role politických lídrů v parlamentních volbách 2017*. 2018. Bakalářská práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Katedra marketingové komunikace a public relations. Vedoucí práce Shavit, Anna.

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**Datum / Podpis studenta/ky**

7.9. 2022

**TUTO ČÁST VYPLŇUJE PEDAGOG/PEDAGOŽKA:**

**Doporučení k tématu, struktuře a technice zpracování materiálu:**

**Případné doporučení dalších titulů literatury předepsané ke zpracování tématu:**

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**Souhlasím s tím, že budu vedoucí(m) této práce.**

**Marcela Konrádová**

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