

Is Friedrich Merz the Leader Germany Needs? CDU's Identity Crisis in the Age of Personalization

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Abstract

This study investigates how a traditional political party, the German CDU, has responded to increasing public demand for charismatic leadership. By analyzing the leadership of Friedrich Merz through the framework of plebiscitary leader democracy, the research highlights how the CDU has navigated the balance between intra-party authority and broader electoral appeal. This qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, explores the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. The findings reveal that Merz has successfully positioned himself within the party by excelling in the four competition values of plebiscitary leader democracy: meritocracy, peaceful conflict resolution, integration, and repoliticization. His election was followed by the CDU's first-ever all-member vote, which marked a departure from previous elite-driven selection processes, granting him a strong internal mandate. However, the study also underscores the challenge of translating intra-party dominance into national electoral success.

Keywords: leader democracy; leader selection; qualities of leader; personal brand; German CDU; Friedrich Merz

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1. Introduction

Democratic leadership begins within political parties. However, many scholars (e.g., Scott, 2018; Illés, and Körösényi 2022; Pakulski and Higley 2008) argue that party politics are going through a process of de-ideologization and convergence. Political families in the classical sense and the traditional ideological cleavages between them are losing 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 solution than static and ideological party programs. There is a discussion about a crisis of political leadership (Castells, 2018; Green, 2016; Scott, 2018; Krasteva, 2019; Weinberg, 2022). So, it's not surprising that now more than ever, a modern democratic party is under pressure to procure the best possible leader.

A democracy which is defined by political leadership may be referred to as leader democracy (Weber, 1978; Körösényi, 2007; Kane & Patapan, 2012). Perhaps the most relevant implications of leader democracy are: (1) institutional mechanisms, through which competent, creative and talented people can be placed in leadership positions and are essential for democracy, and (2) an adequate amount of democratic equality must be sacrificed to ensure capable political leadership (Skovajsa, 2019, p. 140). Scholars suggest that politicians, political professionals, political scientists, journalists, and the broader public acknowledging and discussing the shift towards leader democracy may be beneficial (Pakulski & Higley, 2008; Illés & Körösényi, 2022) as its modern revitalization follows the trend of personalization and at the same time tries to describe the real functioning of contemporary democracies. Therefore, this article focuses on the selection of a leader through the prism of their qualities in a modern democracy.

The personality and qualities of political leaders have long been acknowledged as an important element of politics as well as having influence on political attitudes and behavior (Declercq et al., 1975; Lasswell, 1930; Regenstrei, 1965). However, research to date has focused primarily on voters' perceptions of politicians (Garzia, 2011; Pancer et al., 1999; Valgarðsson et al., 2021), and the leader's personality is not a factor at this stage of the political process. Whereas this article goes one level further and is interested in the qualities of a leader in its selection process, it represents a missing link in the existing research, because before a leader's personal brand (Smith, 2009; Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016; Pich et al., 2020) can appeal to voters, it must win the favor of party members and party elites.

This case study focuses on Friedrich Merz, the designated German chancellor and CDU (Christian Democratic Union) party leader as of March 2025. This qualitative study seeks to explore the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. Merz and his leadership style garner attention as he is set to lead the largest European nation. However, his electoral victory was preceded by a leadership selection process within the party as well as the party's ideological

and programmatic renewal. The authors explore how a traditional center-right political party has responded to an increasing popular demand for charismatic leadership, offering valuable insights for similar parties across Europe.

The aim of this study was not to provide representative statistical data, but rather to achieve a deep understanding of how political actors perceive and carry out the candidate selection process – which qualities they value, which mechanisms they consider fair or effective, and which dilemmas emerge in internal decision-making. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate in this case, as it allows for capturing the complexity, nuance, and contextual embeddedness of such internal party dynamics.

Gaining access to eight party members, who are insiders and experts in their own area may be considered a notable success, given the challenges associated with penetrating elite political structures. These environments are typically opaque, highly selective, and resistant to external inquiry. Establishing the trust required to conduct interviews at this level involves considerable effort, time, and relational capital.

Indeed, the scarcity of existing studies on intra-party processes reflects these very access barriers. This reality underscores the added value of the present research. The study plays an important exploratory role: it asks initial questions, identifies emerging themes, suggests conceptual frameworks, and provides valuable groundwork for more systematic future research.

In conclusion, this study should be understood as a pioneering qualitative probe into an understudied area of political life – the internal mechanisms of candidate selection within parties. Rather than being dismissed due to its limited sample, it should be recognized for opening up an empirically difficult but theoretically significant field of inquiry.

2. The Importance of the Leader

Democratic political systems and political parties are more or less personalized (e.g., Karvonen, 2009; Marino et al., 2022). Political personalization began as a trend in presidential regimes as a result of the erosion of traditional cleavages, the individualization of society, and the growth of the role of modern media, especially television (Voženílková, 2018). Over time, this trend has spread to parliamentarism and has manifested itself in various dimensions of political reality (institutional, media, behavioral; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Empirical research in recent decades has confirmed that personalization also applies to the so-called new democracies (Voženílková, 2018). With political personalization, the leader who is now a part of the political brand ‘became the program’ and came to the fore (Smith, 2009; Guzmán & Sierra, 2009). As personalization progressed, traditional political parties adapted to the importance of political leadership, but also new entities based on the person of the leader began to emerge.

The relationship between the process of personalization and the development of political parties can be seen in the opinions of the political parties. Bobba and Seddone (2011) describe them as personalized and personal. The organization of the party becomes a system of technical experts who support the 'prince' with their communication skills (Panebianco, 1982; Calise, 2005, 2000). Mass parties mobilizing resources have been replaced by strategies similar to political and marketing techniques. Political parties are born as personal structures. Personalization has become a strategic resource that politicians use to bridge the gap created by partisan and social dealignment. This leads to profound changes both in establishing a new relationship between candidate and voter, and in the new ways politicians try to manage the consensus during their term in office (Bobba, 2011, p. 23).

Personalization of political parties can be seen as the link between leader democracy and the personalization of politics in general. Leader democracy is a theoretical concept (see Schumpeter, 1987; Weber, 1978, 2005) 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 their personal characteristics instead of rationally evaluating proposed policies (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025). That is because citizens are only able to judge the performance of a government in retrospect. In the past decade, the subject of leader democracy has reemerged in political science. Current authors such as Körösiényi (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 (cf. Valgarðsson et al. 2021). 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.

In both types of personalized and personal parties, the leader and his (strategy of building) personal brand play a key role (Hughes, 2007; Hughes, Dann & Neale, 2008). A candidate's independent brand is continuing to gain more and more space and attention. In today's world, people vote for a personality they can connect with, not parties that try to lure them with empty promises (Saelens, 2019). Omojola (2008, p. 129) argues that the principle of personal branding

is not only about creating a positive image towards the public. In the context of creating a leader's personal brand identity, it is all about understanding the unique combination of intellectual and emotional elements such as skills, values and passions. Previous research has focused on examining the personal brand of the voter, or comparing it to the personality of the party's brand (Aaker, 1997).

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 (1997) 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) modified it for the reality of British politics, notably adding a sixth dimension of 'uniqueness' and changing the more general dimension of 'competence' to 'leadership'. Smith's (2009) six dimensions, updated for political branding, 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 added dimension of "uniqueness". 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. While it may appear that Žižlavský and Eibl's (2011) version could be applied to German politics more accurately due to the cultural proximity of Czechia and Germany, the only significant difference would be the absence of evidence of the brand personality dimension 'uniqueness'.

The emphasis is, therefore, on the co-branding relationship between the party and the leader (Armannsdottir, Pich & Spry, 2019). While in some cases politicians' personal brands can harm the party, in other cases they allow parties to create a co-branded product around the human element. Political parties and politicians have recognizable personalities (Smith, 2009, p. 214) and complementing the party brand with a personal politics brand allows them to differentiate themselves from each other. Thus, it is desirable for parties to strategically make their leader a personal brand, or to use a politician who is already profiled as a personal brand as a leader (Žižlavský, 2012, p. 233). On the other hand, some research has shown that candidates whose characteristics are not associated with their party have an electoral advantage (Hayes, 2005). The advantage of using co-branding in politics is that the renewal of the leader allows for a rapid repositioning within the political market. The leader's personal brand acts as a guarantor of change, and without the leader's presence, repositioning and rebranding efforts would likely take more time and be more difficult to inform and convince voters of the change (Žižlavský, 2012, pp. 233–234).

Political leaders find themselves devising ad-hoc policy packages to respond to the issue at hand. Pakulski and Higley (2008, p. 47) argue 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. The relationship between the personalization of politics and the spectacle of world leaders has been explored by Balmas and Sheafer (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.

Two important questions for consideration are where to find a good leader and who is a good leader? Appropriate leadership selection is a key objective of political management of the party, 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. Scholars have previously examined candidate selection processes and their political consequences in mainstream parties (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Kenig et al., 2015), and recently in populist parties (Caiani et al., 2021; Höhne, 2021). However, these and other studies do not focus on the quality of the leader, but purely on the processes and mechanisms of their selection. Therefore, we consider this text, despite its limitations (see chapter 3.3), to be highly useful for discussing the deepening trend of personalization of politics not only in relation to voters (externally), but also within political parties.

There is no standardized training for a future party leader, just the general assumption that being a parliamentarian for several years should sufficiently prepare the candidate (Lees-Marshment, 2020, 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). Therefore, candidate selection would depend on the selectorates' political goals: obtaining office would require competence and unity; vote maximization would favor electability; while policy prioritization would focus on candidates representing the policy preferences of party members (Vandeleene & van Haute, 2021).

Research on candidate selection in mainstream parties shows that selectorates have adopted specific formal and informal conditions such as membership seniority, party involvement, support from party factions, previous legislative experience, and incumbency (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Pilet et al., 2015). The increasing attention on candidates' personal qualities has been accompanied by the argument that these expectations and evaluations have become even more

important over time, as partisanship in the electorate has declined dramatically (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Mair & van Biezen, 2001). Illés and Körösényi (2022) defined four values of competition in (plebiscitary) leader democracy, 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 of personal brand thanks to which an individual may succeed as a 'true' democratic leader:

- **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 free and fair elections. This aspect of competition ensures that the losing side respects the election results (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 433–434).
- **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 (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 434).
- **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 (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 434–435).
- **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 (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 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 (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 436), the four criteria present a pioneer attempt to set standards of individual democratic leadership.

3. Research Design

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. 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 (Sommer-Topcu, 2017). The goal is to explore the logic of the selectorate that wants to find the ideal candidate for a party that is aware of the real functioning of democracy (i.e. the importance of the leader) in terms of Illés and Körösi (2022) and Smith (2009). Whereas the logic of the selectorate is complex, the research questions cover a wider range of characteristics of the process:

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, members and the elite perceive the leadership of Friedrich Merz?*

This qualitative study seeks to explore the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. The chosen method is semi-structured interviews (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Bryman, 2012).

3.1 Case Selection

Widely recognized as the antithesis of Angela Merkel and formerly considered an uncharismatic, unlikeable politician, CDU leader Friedrich Merz was set to become German chancellor as of March 2025. This role came with immense expectations, given Germany's economic struggles and the pressing security threats confronting Europe. To better understand Merz' leadership style, it is helpful to take a closer look at his road to success and leadership style within the CDU.

The CDU has been a major political force since the establishment of the German Federal Republic, having led 17 out of 25 federal governments. It is part of the center-right Christian democratic political family of people's parties (Freire & Tsatsanis, 2015). As of 2025, 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 Oct 2, 2025). This makes the CDU a well-suited subject for 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.

3.2 Methods and Data

The interview guide was divided into five thematic areas based on the four aspects of competition in plebiscitary leader democracy (Illés & Körösényi, 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 (Bryman, 2012, p. 577).

Table 1:
The Interview Guide

Aspect of Competition	Questions	Keywords
Peaceful Conflict-Resolution	<p>How does the leader's communication style contribute to resolving conflicts within the party?</p> <p>Can you provide examples of how the leader was able to present a united front during internal party disputes?</p> <p>How does the leader's communication style approach existing conflicts within society?</p>	<p>understanding</p> <p>listening</p> <p>mutual</p> <p>together</p> <p>reconcile</p> <p>connect</p> <p>solution</p> <p>hope</p> <p>future</p> <p>constructive</p>
Meritocratic Selection	<p>What merits do you think are crucial for a party leader?</p> <p>How does the leader's image and communication towards the party members reflect their qualifications for the role?</p> <p>How does the leader's public image and communication towards the voters reflect their qualifications for the role?</p>	<p>skill</p> <p>qualification</p> <p>merit</p> <p>excellence</p> <p>prestige</p> <p>experience</p> <p>success</p> <p>award</p> <p>education</p> <p>career</p>

Aspect of Competition	Questions	Keywords
Integration	<p>How does the leader's communication incorporate the diverse voices and interests within the party?</p> <p>Can you describe how the leader's messaging works to unify the party's various factions and supporters?</p> <p>Can you describe how the leader's messaging works to reach different voter groups?</p>	unity diversity group wing federal state social conservative liberal young old women men children family community business city country identity east/west
Repoliticization	<p>How does the leader bring attention to neglected political issues?</p> <p>How has the leader communicated to define new political opponents?</p> <p>In what ways has the leader's personal brand been leveraged to reinvigorate the party's political agenda?</p>	distinguish define boundary priority competition identity offer ideology enemy ally fight
Branding, Brand Personality	<p>How would you describe the brand personality of the party leader?</p> <p>How would you describe the brand personality of our party?</p> <p>In what ways do you think the party leader's personality traits align with the party's brand?</p> <p>How has our party's brand personality evolved in recent years, and what role has the party leader played in that evolution?</p>	honesty spirited image leadership toughness uniqueness

Source: Authors.

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 communication practices of Friedrich Merz.

In the second round of coding, the researchers grouped these keyword-based transcript segments into more complex codes that captured recurring themes and meanings across interviews. These codes were then refined and clustered into broader, higher-order categories to reflect the underlying concepts relevant to the

research questions. This process allowed for both theory-driven and data-driven insights to emerge. Coding was conducted in German to preserve the nuance of the original responses then later aligned with the English-language theoretical framework. The resulting English codes were organized by respondent group and thematic area. This structure supported the identification of patterns in how the respondents perceive the leadership of Friedrich Merz.

Figure 1:
The Coding Structure – example

Speaker	Supporter 1	Supporter 2	Member 1	Member 2
MERITOCRACY				
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	zuhören / klare Kommunikation (nicht wie Scholz, der nichts sagt), keine populistischen Unwahrheiten - Merz hat es mit der Zeit gelernt / souverän und inhaltlich stark in der Debatte mit Habeck/ Partei grundsätzlich vereint
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	clarity, expert competence, down-to-earth, improvement
PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION				
codes German	cool bleiben, nicht auf Konflikte eingehen, Souveränität (X Vorwürfe - inklusiv), Selbstbewusstsein / alle in der CDU haben sich gut mit dem Sieg von Merz arrangiert / Konfrontativ ja, ggü. politischen Gegnern, nicht gegen gesellschaftlichen Schichten	Direktwahl des PV - Teilhabe, Dazugehören, etwas bewirken können, stärkeres Mandat / haut auf den Tisch / Merkel-Lager vlt 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	hat die Mehrheit der Partei hinter sich vereint/ geschafft, auch seine Nichtwähler zu überzeugen / kein Antikandidat, sondern akzeptabel/ in der Gesellschaft bei Spaltungen klare Ansagen, Grenzen ziehen
codes English	Party: reconcile, give space, calm / society: confrontational x rivals	party: participation, potential exclusion	party: calm, peace, little opposition / society: negative	party: reconcile, connect, acceptable, convinced non-supporters/ society: uncompromising, negative

Source: Authors

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 sampling method used 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 (Bryman, 2012, 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 are they running 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 between ‘party member’ and ‘party supporter’ stems from 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 a 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 ensure confidentiality. However, it is possible to summarize the demographics of the respondents in an aggregated format:

Table 2:
Respondents' Summary

Respondents	Total 8
Stakeholder group	2 supporters (= inactive members) 4 members 2 elite members
Gender	2 women 6 men
Region	4 from Berlin 1 from Brandenburg 1 from Saxony-Anhalt 2 from North Rhine-Westphalia
Age	range 25-47
CDU membership	all respondents have been members for 4+ years

Source: Authors.

In total, eight interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted from June 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.

3.3 Limits of the Study

While discussing current party politics at the top level, the sensitivity of the matter and the issue of confidentiality can be major concerns for the respondents, potentially leading to reservations about answering the questions. This issue can be exacerbated by conducting the interviews online, which tends to be perceived as less personal and potentially less confidential than talking to the respondent in person. 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 (2002, p. 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.

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.

A key methodological limitation of this qualitative study is undoubtedly the small sample size of eight respondents. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population, not even within the selected political party. However, this limitation reflects the nature of qualitative research and, more importantly, the specific characteristics of the research subject rather than a flaw in the research design.

4. Context

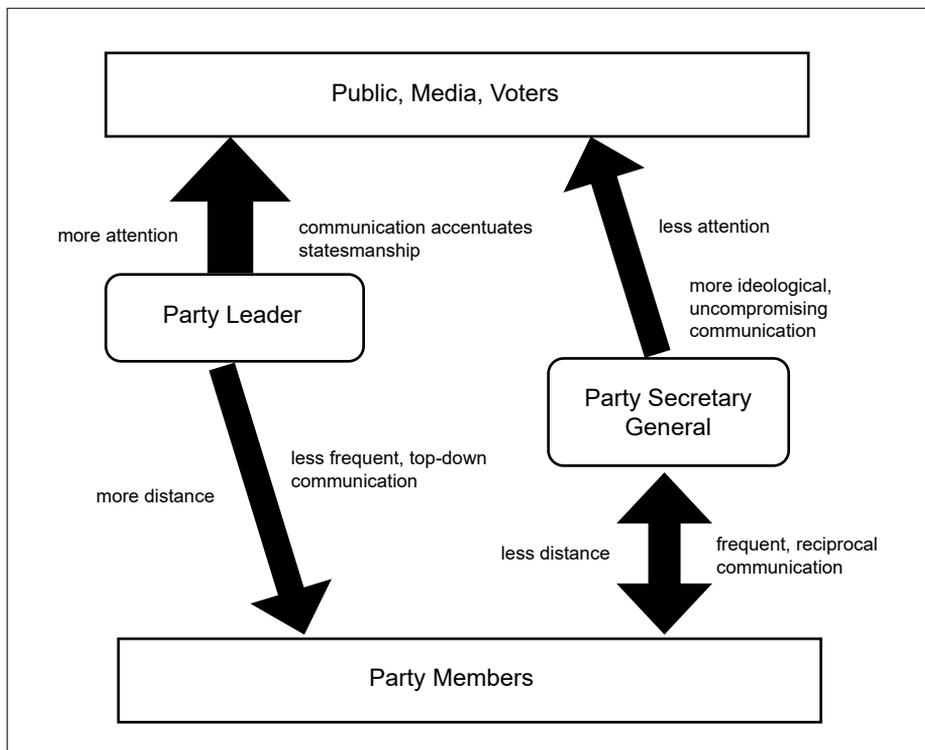
Chiru et al. (2015) show that true competition for party leadership has remained rare in Western democracies. 'Coronations' of the only candidate were common, as well as leaders capitalizing on their incumbency advantage, only rarely losing the race, and candidates often winning by an overwhelming margin. In fact, Germany has been ranked as the least competitive of the observed countries in the period of 1965-2012 (Chiru et al., 2015, pp. 30-31). This lack of competition however changed after the departure of Angela Merkel.

After Angela Merkel stepped down as CDU leader in 2018, the party experienced a period of intense competition and leadership instability. The first leadership race saw Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's preferred successor, narrowly defeating Friedrich Merz in a delegate vote. However, Kramp-Karrenbauer struggled to assert control over the party, particularly after CDU representatives in Thuringia had controversially voted together with the far-right AfD in the state parliament. This crisis undermined her authority, leading to her resignation in 2020 (Zehender, 2024). The next leadership contest in 2021 featured Armin Laschet, then Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, competing against Merz and Norbert Röttgen. Laschet won in a second-round delegate vote but faced immediate challenges, including internal party divisions and competition from CSU (Christian Social Union, CDU's sister party in Bavaria) leader Markus Söder for the chancellor candidacy (Marx, 2024). His campaign was further damaged by a public misstep when he was caught laughing during a visit to a flood-stricken region, contributing to CDU's defeat in the 2021 federal elections (Chambers, 2021).

Following this loss, the CDU sought renewal, leading to a historic all-member vote in 2021 to elect a new leader. In this unprecedented internal poll, Friedrich

Merz, who had previously lost twice in delegate-based leadership contests, secured a decisive victory with 62.5% of the party membership's support. Based on this strong mandate from the party membership, he was subsequently confirmed as party leader by 95% of the delegates at the CDU convention, marking a clear shift from Merkel's centrist approach to a more conservative, economically liberal direction (Hennecke, 2024). Under Merz's leadership, the party worked to rebuild its ideological identity, particularly in cooperation with Secretary General Carsten Linnemann,¹ who supervised the creation of the 'Grundsatzprogramm', the party's new basic principle program (Mendgen, 2023). Merz's leadership stabilized the party internally, but questions remained regarding his ability to connect with the broader electorate as a potential chancellor candidate. His tenure signified a return to more traditional CDU values, but his polarizing image and communication style posed challenges for future electoral success (Heckmann, 2022).

Figure 2:
Communication scheme of Party Leader and Party Secretary General



Source: Authors, based on the interview results.

5. Findings: Plebiscitary Party Leader is Elected Chancellor

This article offers a nuanced portrait of Friedrich Merz based on interviews conducted with specific groups of respondents, focusing on his strengths as a communicator and his appeal to conservative voters. It also highlights his weaknesses, particularly his limited executive experience and polarizing effect within the CDU. The piece underscores the internal tensions Merz faces in balancing ideological clarity with party unity (c.f. Heckmann, 2022). It is important to mention again that the text refers to the research respondents and its results cannot be generalized. However, the conclusions still provide valuable insights into otherwise opaque intra-party processes.

Respondents widely acknowledged that Merz embodies the peaceful conflict-resolution value of plebiscitary leader democracy within the CDU. Party elite members, particularly those involved in strategic decision-making, praised his ability to restore stability after years of internal divisions following Merkel's departure. CDU members also viewed him as a unifying figure who successfully integrated various party factions. However, voter respondents—especially centrist and younger voters—were more critical, noting that his leadership style could be divisive in broader political discourse. Many expressed concern that his assertive rhetoric could alienate potential coalition partners and undecided voters, limiting CDU's national electoral appeal.

The perception of meritocratic selection was more contested among respondents. Party elite and older CDU members emphasized Merz's strong economic credentials and long political career, citing his expertise as a key asset. However, younger and more moderate CDU supporters questioned whether his elite background and corporate ties made him too disconnected from the everyday concerns of voters. This divide was especially noticeable in discussions about his communication style—while some saw his directness as a sign of competence, others perceived it as reinforcing an out-of-touch, technocratic image.

Regarding integration, respondents from the CDU's leadership structure saw Merz as having successfully navigated internal party dynamics, particularly by incorporating the economically liberal and conservative factions. However, voter respondents expressed skepticism about his ability to integrate perspectives beyond the CDU's traditional support base. Many interviewees highlighted his difficulty in appealing to women, younger voters, and urban electorates, groups that were key to Merkel's broader centrist appeal. Some suggested that the CDU's strategic co-branding effort—pairing Merz with Secretary General Carsten Linemann—was an attempt to compensate for this weakness by associating Merz with a more approachable and inclusive figure.

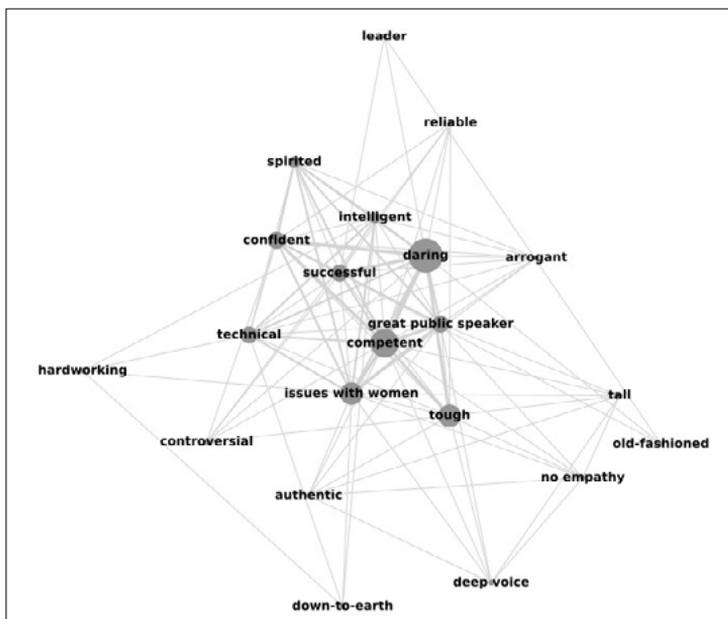
On repoliticization, many respondents agreed that Merz had reinvigorated ideological debate within the CDU. Elite respondents saw this as a necessary correction after the perceived centrist dilution of CDU's brand under Merkel. Party members appreciated his clear positions on economic and security issues,

which they felt provided stronger ideological clarity. However, among general voters, the response was more mixed. While some appreciated his firm stance on issues like fiscal conservatism and migration, others worried that his ideological assertiveness might alienate swing voters who preferred Merkel's pragmatic approach. The study found that while Merz's repoliticization efforts strengthened CDU's internal coherence, they risked narrowing its electoral coalition.

The study also examined how different respondent groups perceived Friedrich Merz's brand personality, identifying both strengths and weaknesses. Across all stakeholder groups, he was recognized for his leadership and authority within the CDU. Party elite respondents credited his strong organizational skills and strategic acumen, while members saw him as decisive and capable of managing the party's direction effectively. However, among voters, perceptions were less uniform—while some valued his strong leadership persona, others found it overly rigid and lacking the warmth associated with more electorally successful leaders.

On honesty, responses were polarized. Some members and elite respondents appreciated his straightforwardness and willingness to challenge political norms. However, among voter respondents' group, his corporate background and past controversies (such as comments about his wealth) raised concerns about his sincerity. Several interviewees noted that he sometimes appeared calculated rather than genuinely connecting to voters and their concerns. This discrepancy suggested that his perceived authenticity was stronger within CDU structures than among the general electorate group of respondents.

Figure 3:
Brand personality traits of Friedrich Merz



Source: Authors, codes according to frequency.

Figure 3 shows that leadership and toughness are often perceived together, forming the backbone of Merz's brand personality, as identified in a qualitative study conducted on a limited sample of specifically selected respondents. Leadership is strongly supported by frequent mention of traits such as competent, successful, and intelligent, which form a dense cluster, reinforcing Merz's reputation as a capable and knowledgeable leader. Toughness was widely acknowledged as a defining characteristic of Merz's leadership and is a dominant dimension in figure 3, with traits such as tough, daring, and controversial appearing frequently and co-occurring, indicating that Merz is widely seen as assertive and resilient. Party elite respondents valued his resilience and ability to assert control over CDU's direction, seeing it as essential for reestablishing the party's credibility after its 2021 electoral defeat. CDU members also appreciated his firm stance on internal discipline and policy direction. However, some voter respondents viewed his toughness as bordering on inflexibility, making him seem unapproachable and resistant to compromise. This perception was particularly strong among voters' group of respondents outside CDU's traditional base, who saw his leadership style as less adaptable to coalition-building.

Honesty is reflected through traits such as authentic, down-to-earth, and reliable, which are frequently mentioned and often co-occur, suggesting that Merz is perceived as sincere and grounded by several of our respondents.

On spiritedness, both respondents of CDU members and party elite's group saw Merz as an energetic and passionate figure, particularly in his commitment to ideological renewal. However, voter respondents noted that his enthusiasm sometimes translated into an overly aggressive communication style. Several interviewees remarked that while he was effective in mobilizing CDU supporters, he struggled to inspire undecided or younger voters who preferred a more inclusive and forward-looking message. Therefore, spirited is represented (in figure 3) by traits such as spirited, confident, and great public speaker, which are central and well-connected, indicating that Merz is seen as energetic and rhetorically strong.

In contrast, image is far more ambivalent, suggesting that while Merz is respected, his emotional appeal and inclusivity may be areas of vulnerability among our respondents. Within the CDU, he was seen as a competent, results-driven leader who effectively rebranded the party's ideological positioning. However, voter respondents often described his image as cold or distant, lacking the relatability necessary for broad electoral appeal. While party elites admired his executive-style leadership, ordinary voters expressed a desire for a leader with a stronger emotional connection and personal charisma.

Traits such as issues with women, no empathy, arrogant, and old-fashioned appear on the periphery, suggesting that while Merz has a strong professional image, his broader public appeal may be limited or contested. Uniqueness doesn't seem to be an obviously strong dimension in the graph; however, traits such as tall, deep voice, and technical could be seen as contributing to a distinctive and memorable personal brand based on research respondents.

Finally, on uniqueness, respondents agreed that Merz distinguished himself from his predecessors, particularly Merkel. Interviewed CDU members who had felt alienated by Merkel's centrist pragmatism appreciated his more defined ideological stance. However, voter respondents were divided—while some welcomed a clearer conservative identity, others questioned whether Merz's approach was too backward-looking to attract new demographics. Several interviewees noted that while he successfully differentiated himself within the CDU, his ability to stand out positively on a national stage remained uncertain.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

At a time when academic and media texts are filled with headlines such as 'crisis of democracy', 'rise of authoritarianism', 'backsliding democracy', and 'weak leadership' (Mechkova, Luhrmann & Lindberg, 2017; Cianetti & Hanley 2021; Gjipali, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin 2018; Galsto, 2020; Mounk, 2018; Norris & Inglehart 2019; Zielonka, 2018), etc., it is increasingly important that world leaders not only live up to the demands of their constituents but also to the principles of democracy, which increasingly seems to be personalized, i.e. based on elites, leaders. This is not only an original theoretical conceptualization of modern concepts (selection of leaders in the context of personal branding and leader democracy in a revitalized) with which political science is increasingly concerned but a unique probe into one of Europe's most important countries and its internal democratic-managerial functioning.

Intra-party plebiscitary leadership alone does not guarantee electoral success—it must be complemented by adaptive political management and a responsive policy agenda. The article covers the CDU party congress where Merz navigated debates around the introduction of a women's quota. It reflects the party's struggle to modernize while maintaining traditional values. Merz is portrayed as a pragmatic leader trying to reconcile differing factions within the CDU (see Herrmann & Koopmann, 2022). The CDU's return to power was driven by a public preference for experienced and reliable governance. Despite Friedrich Merz's limited background in executive political roles, voters strongly associated the CDU with competence in addressing the country's most urgent challenges—particularly in economic policy and both internal and external security (Bundestagswahl, 2025). This perception helped bridge the gap between leadership experience and electoral appeal. The coalition-building effort underscored that, as well as the importance of the integrative function of plebiscitary leader democracy, as Merz had to bridge inter-party ideological divides while maintaining internal party cohesion. His leadership style, initially viewed as rigid, evolved during negotiations with coalition partner – the Social Democrats – a necessary partner for a swift constitutional budgetary reform (Deutsche Welle, 2025). The three

parties successfully reached a compromise despite the tough election campaign, reflecting a strategic shift toward a broader political appeal (Greive & Olk, 2025).

In this context, Henkel (2024) analyzes the strategic communication of Merz, Söder, and Wüst regarding the Union's chancellor candidacy. Merz emerges as the frontrunner, with his rivals showing calculated restraint. The article emphasizes the importance of timing and unity in shaping the CDU/CSU's electoral prospects. Kain (2024) explores the rise in Merz's popularity, attributing it to his clear stance on security, migration, and economic issues. The article presents Merz as a stabilizing figure in uncertain times. His transformation from a divisive figure to a credible chancellor candidate is a central theme. Last but not least, Mendgen (2024) portrays Merz as increasingly assertive and decisive, likening him to a 'Basta-Kanzler' in the tradition of Gerhard Schröder. The article highlights Merz's firm positions on EU bureaucracy, migration, and defense. It suggests that his leadership style is resonating with voters seeking clarity and strength.

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'. (Merz [@merzcd], 2024).

Taking all of this into consideration, we see that Merz excels in the four competition values of leader democracy very favorably given the rampant anti-democratic tendencies (not only) in Europe. While he adjusted his communication style to position himself as a chancellor candidate, it remained uncertain if he would convince the public as effectively as party members. In the post-election period, we know that the CDU/CSU under Merz's leadership won a total of 208 seats out of 630 in the February (2025) Bundestag elections (The Federal Returning Officer, 2025), making Merz the winner of the electoral contest and the future German chancellor. Merz is seen as successful and competent but also polarizing and controversial, with deficiencies in the brand personality dimensions image and honesty, and in political charisma, which will also be an important factor in post-election negotiations. Therefore, a co-branding strategy with other party personalities is essential for Merz's inter-party and intra-party action.

In conclusion, Merz's ascent and the CDU's electoral performance exemplify the evolving dynamics of political leadership in Germany. His case highlights the tension between internal party consolidation and broader political engagement. Moving forward, the CDU's ability to govern effectively will depend on its capacity to balance leader-centric communication and policymaking with coalition adaptability, ensuring that the personalization of politics does not come at the expense of democratic legitimacy and public trust.

To conclude, this study provides insight into the specific case of Friedrich Merz's election as CDU chairman, revealing some of the key mechanisms of internal party decision-making and dynamics within one of Germany's most important political parties. However, it should be noted that the results cannot be

generalized to a large extent, as the research is based on a relatively small number of respondents and focuses on one specific case. For this reason, further research should strive for a broader empirical basis, both by expanding the number of cases analyzed and by conducting a more in-depth comparison across parties, time periods, and political contexts.

At the same time, this work touches on a more general problem in political science – a long-standing lack of interest in intra-party processes, mainly due to their difficult accessibility. Internal negotiations, factional bargaining, and leadership selection mechanisms often remain hidden from the public and researchers, making this type of research methodologically challenging but all the more valuable. This is where the contribution of this study lies: it raises questions that are still often marginalized in academic debate and shows that a deeper understanding of internal party processes is key to a comprehensive understanding of the functioning of party structures and democratic politics as such.

Furthermore, this study may serve as a preliminary signal for traditional, less personalized parties and party systems, highlighting areas that could benefit from further investigation. Rather than presenting definitive conclusions, we suggest several general directions that might warrant attention in future research. For instance, traditional political parties might consider how to leverage the popular mandate of a newly elected leader as an opportunity for programmatic and brand renewal (Cross & Pilet, 2015; Hughes, 2007). Internally, strengthening communication to secure member support and ensure coherent messaging may also be of strategic importance. In terms of external presentation, parties could explore co-branding strategies, aligning the leader's personal image with other party figures to mitigate potential weaknesses (Hughes, 2007; Balmas & Shaefer, 2013). Finally, increased emphasis on leader competition values in both internal and external communication may offer another avenue worth considering (Illés & Körösi, 2022).

Future research could therefore proceed in several directions. On the one hand, it would be appropriate to focus on comparing selection procedures across parties within a single country, or even in an international context, where it would be possible, for example, to compare the CDU with other conservative parties in Europe. Furthermore, it would be possible to deepen the analysis of factors that influence support for candidates within the party—for example, the role of regional structures, party networks, media representation, or the relationship between the membership base and the leadership. Finally, it would be useful to analyze how the concept of party leadership is changing in response to broader social and political changes, such as the fragmentation of the political spectrum, the personalization of politics, or the digitization of party life.

Overall, research into intra-party democracy (in context of personalization) is an important but still underexposed field, the further development of which can significantly contribute to understanding the current changes in political parties and party systems in democratic regimes.

Data availability: Sharing raw data-interview audio-recordings, transcripts or field notes may reveal the identity of participants, violating the promises of confidentiality. Requests to access the qualitative data can be directed to the authors.

Supplementary Information: Supplemental material for this article is available in the authors' archive.

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Interviews:

- 'Party Supporter 1'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 4 June, 2024.
- 'Party Supporter 2'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 5 June, 2024.
- 'Party Member 2'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 10 June, 2024.
- 'Party Member 3'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 11 June, 2024.
- 'Party Member 1'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 14 June, 2024.
- 'Party Member 4'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 17 June, 2024.
- 'Party Elite 1'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 24 June, 2024.
- 'Party Elite 2'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 10 July, 2024.

Endnotes:

1 The most unexpected outcome of the interviews was the central role attributed to CDU Secretary General Carsten Linnemann, who was consistently brought up by respondents despite not being prompted. His appointment by Friedrich Merz in 2023 was widely praised as a strategic move that improved both internal and external party communication. Respondents noted that Linnemann's provocative public style allows Merz to adopt a more statesmanlike tone, positioning himself as a future chancellor candidate. Internally, Linnemann actively engages with party members through modern tools like podcasts, polls, and online meetings, enhancing transparency and participation. This division of labor enables Merz to focus on elite-level and public-facing communication, while Linnemann manages grassroots engagement and ideological messaging.