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Establishment or New Blood?

The CDU and House Democrats Elect Leaders

By Emily Hruban

In the coming weeks, both Germany's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Democratic Party in the United States will face serious internal leadership decisions, with consequences for the future of both powerful parties.

In Germany, after 13 years as chancellor and almost two decades leading the CDU, Angela Merkel announced in late October that she is stepping down from her position as party chairwoman. On December 7th, delegates from the CDU will elect a new party leader, who will also likely serve as the party's candidate for chancellor in the next parliamentary election.

In the United States, the Democratic Party faces similar soul searching, as the House of Representatives selects the next Speaker of the House on January 3rd. Although Nancy Pelosi was nominated unopposed to become the next Speaker of the House by the Democrats, some members of her own party, notably a group of incoming congressmen, have questioned if she is the right person for the job. In a public letter, the group argued, "voters in hard-won districts, and across the country, want to see real change in Washington,"¹ meaning that new leadership is needed. Despite their efforts, Pelosi stands poised to take back the position, but questions remain about what kind of leadership is needed to carry the Democratic Party forward.

Much like the nomination of Nancy Pelosi, the race to take Merkel's role as leader of the CDU is sparking critical questions about the future of the CDU. This B | Brief explores some of the striking similarities between these internal leadership debates that will decide the future of these powerful political parties.

More of the Same?

Both the Democratic Party and the CDU are grappling with how to deal with voters' widespread frustration with the political establishment. Pelosi is the ultimate Washington insider, having served in Congress for over 30 years and been in party leadership for over a decade. Although her supporters argue that someone with experience and a

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proven track record is needed for such an important role, her critics counter that she carries the baggage of every misstep the party has made over the years. Some blame her for Democratic losses in 2016.

Likewise, Merkel's protégé, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (also known as AKK), carries with her the baggage of the Merkel administration. She has been a staunch Merkel ally as prime minister of the state of Saarland and as Secretary General of the CDU under Merkel. AKK's opponents argue that she will be unable to win back the conservative voters lost during the refugee situation in 2015 and 2016. AKK has done little to assuage concerns that she is simply Merkel 2.0. In a recent interview with *Der Spiegel*, she noted, "Naturally, every party leader stands on the shoulders of their predecessor, for better or worse. I will not distance myself artificially from Angela Merkel."² Many wonder if AKK – or Pelosi – is too much a part of the establishment to galvanize voters and invigorate their parties.

How Rich is Too Rich

Although not much has been made of Pelosi's wealth in her bid for Speaker of the House, Americans are starting to question why their elected officials are all so wealthy. According to financial disclosure forms, Pelosi has a net worth of at minimum \$16 million.³ Her wealth is astounding for the average American, but the norm in Congress, and likely pales in comparison to the personal wealth of the president. Congresswoman-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a 29-year old progressive from New York, has called attention to this phenomenon. She says Congress is set up for the wealthy, noting that she won't receive a salary until January, making it difficult to pay her living expenses in Washington as she manages her transition. Ocasio-Cortez says she will support Pelosi in January, but the questions she raised about wealth in politics resonate with many Americans.

In Germany, where personal wealth is not as prevalent – or visible – amongst elected officials, it can be a liability in the political arena. Friedrich Merz, the CDU politician-turned-businessman, is AKK's biggest competition in the race. Merz's advocacy for deeper European integration and more investment in Germany's digital transformation have been obscured by conversations about his personal wealth, with *Der Spiegel* and other news outlets asking the question, "Can a millionaire be the leader of the CDU?"⁴

The problem goes beyond the money itself. First, Merz has played down his wealth, describing himself as upper-middle class, despite his million-euro income. He explained the seeming inconsistency by arguing that middle class is not "simply economic," and that his parents taught him "the values that characterize the middle class," like "hard work"

and "discipline."⁵

Moreover, one of his most lucrative positions has been as the head of BlackRock's German supervisory board. The firm's Munich offices were raided in early November as part of a tax fraud investigation. Although the alleged fraud pre-dates Merz's tenure at the firm, the raid was a reminder of the complications that such business connections might create.

Fresh Face, Fresh Take?

Another central question that both the Democratic Party and CDU are grappling with is when to pass the baton to a younger generation. Pelosi is 78 years old, almost two decades older than the average age for Democrats in the House of Representatives (61 years old).⁶ The Republican Party, on the other hand, has selected much younger leaders, like Paul Ryan (who did not seek re-election this year), to represent them. Pelosi's critics argue that younger leadership may be needed to engage young voters and give young Democrats the space needed to launch their careers on the national stage.

Jens Spahn, the third and final contender for the head of the CDU, has been using his age to make exactly this point. At 38, he is the youngest of the three candidates by almost two decades and has been an outspoken critic of Merkel, especially on immigration. He argues, "I bring, perhaps also just because of my age, a different perspective on things." As a younger person, he contends, he is thinking about what will happen in "ten, twenty years,"⁷ with the party. However, Spahn's youth may not be enough, since he appears to be lagging behind his two opponents.

The Future

On both sides of the Atlantic, the parties must decide how to deal with widespread antipathy toward the political establishment, questions about wealth and politics, and how to bring the next generation of politicians into the fold. Although Nancy Pelosi was nominated unopposed, she faces some of the same central questions that Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merz, and Spahn will on December 7th. Both the Democratic Party and the CDU are at critical junctions, as the Democrats aim to act as a check on President Trump, and the CDU fights to maintain power on the national and state levels. These leadership decisions will impact their ability to craft a compelling platform and win back voters.

Endnotes:

1 <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/489-democrats-letter-pelosi-speaker/24a7e79878300d57dc56/optimized/full.pdf#page=1>

2 "Mag sein, dass sich manche den starken Mann wünschen," Der Spiegel, 17 November 2018, pp. 30.

3 <http://www.latimes.com/projects/how-much-are-they-worth/>

4 <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/cdu-annegret-krampkarrenbauer-jens-spahn-und-friedrich-merz-an-der-basis-a-1238382.html>

5 <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-11/friedrich-merz-cdu-vorsitz-einkommen>

6 https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/politics/young-democrats-pelosi-opposition/?utm_term=.5e17bd56b095

7 <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/13399/4106760>