

# *Rise of Far Right Leaves Germany's Conservatives at a Crossroads*

The surge of the Alternative for Germany party has shaken the country's political establishment. But for mainstream conservatives, it has also prompted an acute identity crisis.



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Reporting from Berlin

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Mario Voigt, a leader of Germany's mainstream conservative party, has watched with concern the slow but steady string of victories notched by the far-right Alternative for Germany, known as the AfD.

In his home state of Thuringia, in eastern Germany, the AfD just last month won the district administrator's seat, giving the far right bureaucratic authority over an area for the first time.

Since the spring, the AfD has only gathered momentum. The party has gained at least four points in polls since May, rising to 20 percent support and overtaking the country's governing center-left Social Democrats to become Germany's second-strongest party. A more recent poll, released on Sunday, put the AfD at a record high of 22 percent support.

The AfD is now nipping at the heels of Mr. Voigt's own Christian Democratic Union, or C.D.U., the party of former Chancellor Angela Merkel, which remains the country's most popular but now sits in opposition.

"Now is the critical juncture," Mr. Voigt said in an interview. "We have to understand, if we are not showing or portraying ourselves as the real opposition in Germany, people will defect to the Alternative for Germany."

The ascent of the AfD, a party widely viewed as a threat to Germany's democratic fabric, has posed a crisis for the country's entire political establishment, but an especially acute one for the Christian Democrats, who are struggling openly with how to deal with the challenge.

Should they pivot further right themselves and risk their centrist identity? Should they continue to try to isolate the AfD? Or, as that becomes increasingly difficult, should they break longstanding norms and work with the AfD instead?

Those questions have bedeviled not only the Christian Democrats in Germany but also

other mainstream conservative parties around Europe as nationalist and hard-right parties have made strides. Most recently, in Spain, the conservative Popular Party began partnering with the far-right Vox party at a local level. It even seemed prepared to do so nationally, until Spanish voters rebuked Vox in elections on Sunday.

As state parliament elections approach in eastern Germany, including in Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony, finding answers is urgent for the country's Christian Democrats. Eyeing potential victories in the former East Germany, the AfD has vowed to foment a "political earthquake" in the months ahead.

For now, the AfD has the political winds at its back. Germany's support for Ukraine as it fends off Russia's invasion — and the energy and refugee crises the war has provoked — has fueled German anxiety and, along with it, support for the AfD.

As the current government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz, a Social Democrat, tries to reorient Germany's economic and security policies, critics say it has not made its case convincingly enough for many Germans.

But neither, perhaps, has the C.D.U. in opposition.



Chancellor Olaf Scholz, center, during a visit to a Siemens plant in Erlangen, Germany, this month. Pool photo by Ronald Wittek

"The C.D.U., its more moderate worldview and its moderate position is not really equipped for the situation of this time, when we are having a war, when we have in the energy crisis, with high costs and now with a government which tries to ideologically influence people's lives," Mr. Voigt, the leader of the C.D.U. in Thuringia's state

parliament, said.

“This together, in my opinion, forces the C.D.U. to answer the question: What is your DNA? What is your different perspective?”

It is a remarkable round of public soul-searching from a party that as recently as 2021 had a lock on political power in Berlin for nearly two decades under Ms. Merkel. But now the party is engaged in a sometimes messy public debate over how to meet an angrier, more uncertain time.

Friedrich Merz, the leader of the Christian Democrats, in a television interview on Sunday night appeared to open the door to working with the far-right AfD in local governments. The party had previously vowed never to cooperate at any level with the AfD, which Germany’s domestic intelligence agency has classified as a “suspected” extremist organization.

“At the municipal level, party politics have advanced a bit too far anyway,” he said. “There has now been elected a district administrator in Thuringia. And, of course, this is a democratic election. In Saxony-Anhalt, in a small community, a mayor has been elected who belongs to the AfD. And, of course, this is a democratic election. We also have to accept that.”

After members of his own party bristled at his comments, Mr. Merz walked them back. One of his deputies, Carsten Linneman, said that Mr. Merz was merely pointing out the policy’s “difficult implementation on the ground.”

“If it’s about a new day care center in the local Parliament, for example, we can’t vote against it just because the #AfD is voting along,” Mr. Linneman said in a statement. “We do not make ourselves dependent on right-wing radicals.”



The leader of the Christian Democratic Union in Thuringia's state parliament, Mario Voigt, voting in Erfurt, Germany, in 2020. Filip Singer/EPA, via Shutterstock

Norbert Röttgen, a C.D.U. lawmaker in Parliament, called recent polling showing the AfD's ascent “a disaster” and “an alarm signal” for “all parties of the center.”

His party, he said, needed to “ask itself self-critically why we are not benefiting in practice from such great dissatisfaction with the government.”

Some political experts view the resurgence of the AfD as a rejection of Ms. Merkel's policies — particularly her immigration and climate-friendly stances. That has created a particularly awkward situation for current members of the party.

To win back voters, “it will be necessary to reject some of the policies of Merkel,” said Torsten Oppelland, the chairman of the political science department at the University of Jena in Thuringia. But, he added, doing so ran the risk of alienating others.

The Christian Democrats, he said, “will go on being an important party. But for winning governing majorities, it's a huge problem.”

Many in the party have declared that they will never resort to pushing the kind of far-right, populist rhetoric that the AfD traffics in. Markus Söder, the head of the state in Bavaria, has warned that the party cannot campaign on a message of “anger and frustration.”

“Repeating and chasing after populists does not bring any positive results; on the contrary, it strengthens the right-wing original and not the copy,” Mr. Söder told a local newspaper. “I will not risk Bavaria's political decency for a fleeting percent of approval

in the populist area.”

Yet some in the party have begun tilting further right. Mr. Merz this month replaced a top party aide responsible for day-to-day political strategy with a more conservative member.

Much of the party’s angst has been channeled into pummeling the climate-friendly Greens, a part of Chancellor Scholz’s governing coalition. Conservatives blame the Greens for stoking anti-Berlin sentiment in the more rural, economically depressed areas where the AfD enjoys strong support.

And whereas Ms. Merkel famously declared “We can do it!” at the peak of Europe’s immigration crisis in 2015, Mr. Merz has adopted a more hawkish tone.



An asylum seeker taking a selfie with then-Chancellor Angela Merkel after her visit to registration center in Berlin in 2015. Bernd Von Jutrczenka/DPA, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“The refugee crisis is present again, combined with the uneasy feeling that there is always enough money for refugees, but less and less for kindergartens, schools and hospitals,” he wrote in a recent edition of his newsletter, explaining the rise of the AfD.

Mr. Voigt believes the Christian Democrats can still find electoral success with the party’s “pragmatism” and “moderate worldview.” But its message, he said, must be “understood at people’s tables.”

“You have to tear down this wall in a way,” Mr. Voigt said, to bring AfD-friendly voters

“over to the good side of politics, the democratic side. They have frustration, they have anger, you have to address it. And you have to talk to them in a language that they understand.”

Jan Redmann, the party leader in Brandenburg, said in an interview that he believed that C.D.U. members had inadvertently allowed the AfD to define their positions on crucial issues like immigration, because they “tried not to be mixed up with” the far-right party.

“People want a government that secures the borders — people are against illegal trafficking, against illegal migration,” Mr. Redmann said. “And if no party in the democratic field is giving them this position, it makes the AfD stronger.”



An Alternative for Germany campaign poster in Saxony-Anhalt this month. Filip Singer/EPA, via Shutterstock

Ekaterina Bodyagina contributed reporting.