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Carol Hager

Bryn Mawr College, chager@brynmawr.edu

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The Shifting Role of Climate Change in the 2021 Bundestag Election

Carol Hager

Environmental Studies and Political Science, Bryn Mawr College

Abstract: The climate crisis unfolded in real time during the 2021 Bundestag campaign, as western Germany experienced sudden, catastrophic flooding. The climate issue presented a varying and at times unexpected array of challenges and opportunities to the German political parties. In this article I will analyze the shifting role of climate change as it played out during the campaign, in the coalition discussions that followed, and in the first nine months of the new traffic light coalition government.

Keywords: climate change, climate policy, platforms, renewable energy, 2021 Bundestag election

The 2021 Bundestag campaign unfolded against the backdrop of an escalating climate crisis. That spring, the German Constitutional Court rejected the 2019 Federal Climate Change Act on the grounds that it failed to protect future generations from the impacts of climate change. In the summer, catastrophic floods inundated whole villages in western Germany, while wildfires raged in Greece, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. Fridays for Future demonstrations and a hunger strike in front of the Reichstag shortly before the vote kept the climate issue prominently on the public agenda. Indeed, surveys show that it was one of the top two issues in the minds of voters throughout the summer and early fall. As such, it presented an array of opportunities and challenges to the German political parties and to extra-parliamentary movements in Germany that were seeking to influence the election.

Interestingly, support for particular parties did not track strongly with the climate issue; the prominence of climate change did not consistently benefit the parties most closely identified with it in the public mind. In the following sections, I will analyze the shifting role of the climate change issue in the campaign and the sometimes unexpected ways in which particular parties succeeded or failed to take advantage of it. The election results leave several puzzles, which I will try to explain:



- Why did the Union—the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU)— fail to win more of the vote, given outgoing Chancellor Merkel’s strong record on climate change?
- Why did voters trust the Social Democratic Party (SPD) more than others on the climate issue?
- Why did the Alternative for Germany (AfD) take such a hard line against climate action in spite of the popularity of the issue?
- Why didn’t the Left Party get a bounce from its strong climate action platform?
- Why did support for Alliance 90/The Greens decline during the summer despite the increased prominence of its signature issue?
- Why was the youth vote split between the Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP), whose policy approaches to climate are very different?

The “Climate Chancellor” Leaves Office

Climate change has long been a prominent theme in German politics. Aided by grassroots environmental groups and several widely publicized scientific reports, the issue reached the political agenda of West Germany in the mid-1980s and stayed there. By the end of that decade, all of the major political parties cited climate as one of their priorities.¹ Although the issue was not framed in terms of climate in East Germany during the 1980s, concern over environmental damage from air pollution was one of the main drivers of grassroots activism there as well.²

As the largest economy in Europe and the fourth largest in the world, united Germany has played an important role in meeting European and global climate change mitigation ambitions through its early commitment to the *Energiewende*, the transition from a fossil fuel-based to a renewables-based energy system.³ The German public’s concern over climate change is reflected in the remarkable durability of popular support for the *Energiewende*. Although that support has slipped from its high-water mark of close to 95 percent early in the twenty-first century, it is still comparatively very high. In a December 2020 survey, for example, 86 percent of respondents found strengthening and building out renewable energy technologies to be “very or extraordinarily important” (65 percent) or “important” (21 percent).⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic did not detract from the salience of the climate issue.

In the 2021 federal election campaign, the outgoing government led by the *Volksparteien* (the CDU/CSU and the SPD) claimed much of the credit for

Germany's leadership on climate issues. Angela Merkel had compiled a solid record of climate action. As environment minister under Helmut Kohl, she had led the first UN Climate Conference (COP 1) in Berlin in 1995. Her international advocacy had earned her the title of "climate chancellor" during her first term in office. As leader of the 2005–2009 grand coalition government, she had been instrumental in persuading the EU and the G8 to adopt greenhouse gas reduction targets. She had been a leading force in lobbying for a binding global climate treaty after Paris and a leader in pledging financial support for climate efforts in the Global South.

For all its accomplishments, the Merkel-led government's record left room for improvement in important areas. It was criticized particularly harshly for its failure to reconcile support for German industry (especially the automobile and lignite coal industries) with domestic greenhouse gas reduction targets. Merkel's support of coal and natural gas as bridge fuels in the face of the 2022 shutdown of domestic nuclear power also exacerbated tensions with renewable energy advocates and, along with lagging efforts to decarbonize the housing and transport sectors, made Germany's climate goals difficult to attain.

Merkel had succeeded in leveraging developments in the final years of her chancellorship to regain stalled domestic momentum on climate issues. The emergence of Fridays for Future as a political force, along with surging support for the Greens in the 2018 Bavarian and Hessian state elections, provided impetus for the 2019 Climate Action Law. The need for a COVID-19 recovery package gave an opportunity to outline a "green recovery" that prioritizes decarbonization of the transport sector. When the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in April 2021 that the Climate Action Law failed to protect future generations, the Merkel government responded immediately by accelerating Germany's target date for achieving carbon neutrality to 2045, placing the country back in a leadership position on climate and creating a target that would differentiate the political parties over the course of the summer campaign.

Nevertheless, a general sense of crisis fatigue seemed to accompany the chancellor's final months in office, and this feeling encompassed the climate issue, among others. Angela Merkel herself seemed dissatisfied with her climate record. In her last national press conference in July 2021, she claimed credit for major accomplishments, but also recognized that Germany had not done enough on her watch to avert a global climate catastrophe: "I have devoted a great deal of energy to climate action ... Nevertheless, I am sufficiently equipped with a scientific mind to see that the objective realities show that we cannot continue at this pace, but that they require us to speed up."⁵

“Everybody’s Talking about Climate”: Platforms and Slogans of the Major Political Parties

The 2021 federal parliamentary election was the first in which all of the major parties included climate as an important part of their platforms and, with the exception of the AfD, competed for the mantle of climate leadership. Alliance 90/The Greens put climate at the core of its politics, proposing that every federal policy be evaluated in terms of meeting the 1.5°C Paris target for limiting global warming. Its members proposed a rise in the carbon tax, whose distribution among the population would help achieve the goal of a socially just climate policy. They also proposed a *Mobilitätswende*, a transformation in transportation and mobility as far-reaching as the one in energy.⁶

The year 2021 was the first time the Greens ran a candidate for chancellor, and their rise in the polls after the announcement seemed to indicate that Annalena Baerbock was taken seriously as a candidate. The method by which she was selected received much positive press coverage as well. She and Robert Habeck, the two Green leaders, both enjoyed substantial support as potential candidates. They met and agreed that Baerbock would be the party’s choice, a consensual solution that put the Greens in stark contrast to the Union and seemed to indicate a degree of solidarity that had historically been missing from Green politics at the national level.

Baerbock was not alone, however, in claiming leadership on climate issues. Both the SPD and Union candidates took credit for the major strides made during Merkel’s tenure as chancellor. CDU candidate Armin Laschet and SPD candidate Olaf Scholz outspokenly supported the Merkel administration’s commitment to climate neutrality by 2045 and an end to coal-fired energy by 2038. Both advocated for a massive buildout of renewable energies. The Union stressed new technologies and innovation in achieving these goals, while the SPD stressed the importance of local participation in the energy transition. The Union promised cheaper electricity for citizens and industry, with savings achieved through emissions trading. The SPD proposed upgrading Germany’s transportation and mobility sector to make it the most modern and climate friendly in Europe and to provide quality jobs. Unlike the CDU, the SPD argued for speed limits on highways.

For its part, the FDP avoided committing itself to specific dates for achieving climate neutrality and instead advocated for innovation through market activity rather than regulation in all climate-relevant policy areas. Its slogan was “Innovation not prohibition; technology not ideology; ingenuity not bureaucracy.” In emissions policy, this meant favoring carbon dioxide removal or carbon capture and storage technologies. In transportation, it

translated to a “technology open” position rather than advocating a switch to electric vehicles. The FDP’s campaign was centered more on Christian Lindner, the party’s leader, than on a specific policy platform.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the Left Party focused heavily on linking climate and social policy in its election platform and proposed a fundamental restructuring of economy and society in order to achieve its goals. By committing to a target date of 2035 for achieving carbon neutrality, it even came in ahead of the Greens, who subsequently had to match the Left’s target date in their own campaigning. Both parties also rejected the outgoing government’s planned 2038 exit from coal, proposing a target date of 2030 instead. The Left Party stood out from the rest by advocating for free local public transportation and expanding its concept of mobility to include not only means of transport but also physical and social accessibility to transport.

The only party to reject climate action out of hand, the AfD campaigned on an explicitly pro-fossil fuel platform and proposed to withdraw the country from all obligations, domestic and international, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The AfD also proposed to limit expansion of renewable energy and to reintroduce nuclear energy. Further, the party approached the issue of mobility in a “technology open” way, which mostly meant outspoken support for continued use of fossil fuel-powered vehicles.

In sum, all but one of the major political parties claimed leadership on this issue. Major differences included the Greens’ and Left’s shorter timetable for the retreat from coal and for achievement of the goal of climate neutrality. Differences in approach to climate action were also visible in the language of the campaign. The Union’s and FDP’s emphasis on industrial innovation appealed to the anti-regulatory segments of their support, while the SPD’s, Greens’, and Left Party’s focus on social justice appealed to the more socially minded elements of their support. In the course of the campaign, three televised debates took place among the top candidates from the Union, SPD, and Greens. Dubbed “triells” (as opposed to duels), all three debates featured questions on climate. It was certainly the highest visibility that the issue has received in a Bundestag campaign, reflecting the current centrality of climate to national politics—a striking contrast to the 2017 federal election campaign. However, the questions were framed mostly with regard to the short-term costs of climate policy and how the German economy would absorb them. As pointed out by *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*, this framing, in a year when catastrophic climate-related flooding would cost the German taxpayer untold amounts of money, came off to some as “more than outdated.”⁷

The 2021 campaign also saw an uptick in political actions by non-party activist and shadow groups around the climate issue. Many of these had to

do with campaign posters and billboards. Although experts claim that posters have little effect on actual voting patterns, these poster actions generated a lively public debate. All of the major political parties featured posters on climate policy. Some climate activist groups offered do-it-yourself alternative poster kits that supporters could design and download. Dein Plakat für unsere Zukunft (Your Poster for Our Future), for example, was a group of hackers that offered poster templates poking fun at the climate policies of all the larger parties. The satirical party named simply The Party (Die Partei) helped out by hanging these crowdsourced posters in hundreds of towns. An especially popular one featured AfD politician Alexander Gauland in front of a burning forest, with the slogan “Ich grill, wann ich will” (I grill when I want to).

Other groups designed their own satirical posters. The grassroots group Extinction Rebellion, for example, launched a billboard campaign against the CDU that featured the slogan, “Everybody’s talking about climate. We’re ruining it.” A right-wing organization produced billboards designed to look like legitimate Greens campaign signs but with slogans like “Climate Socialism,” “Prosperity Annihilation,” and “Eco Terror.” Some of the efforts were more hard-edged. A right-wing extremist party, The Third Way, sponsored posters featuring the slogan “Hang the Greens.” Legal challenges to what was seen as a call to violence resulted in these being removed in Bavaria and restricted (weakly) in Saxony. It is unclear whether any of these actions had an impact on the vote, but they did showcase the skepticism of climate activists toward all major parties except the Greens, as well as the hostility of right-wing activists toward the Greens. They also kept climate in a high-visibility position throughout the campaign.

The Climate Crisis Hits Home

In addition to the campaign itself, a relentless series of climate-related disasters kept the issue in the public eye over the summer of 2021. In July, parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia were inundated by massive flooding. Panicked residents trapped in their homes shared harrowing videos on social media. The world looked on in horror as the floods appeared to swallow entire villages. More than 180 people lost their lives in Germany, and damages exceeded 30 billion Euros.⁸ Shortly thereafter, wildfires ravaged drought-stricken Southern Europe and the Western United States. Images of dazed-looking residents staring back at their burning villages as they were evacuated by ferry from the Greek island of Evia were difficult to forget. There was very little dispute in the European press that these catastrophes

were the result of human-caused climate change. Increasingly intense storms, endemic drought, record heat, and poor planning for climate impacts were constantly in the news. As one Greek farmer said after surveying the damage, “We should consider what legacy we are handing down to our children ... This was passed down to us. What will we give? Scorched earth? How will they live?”⁹

The summer of 2021 also saw a renewed surge in youth activism on the climate issue. Fridays for Future had achieved particular resonance among young Germans since its founding in 2018. It was begun by then 15-year-old student Greta Thunberg, who demonstrated in front of the Swedish parliament every school day for three weeks before the national elections in order to draw attention to her government’s inaction on climate issues. Images of the diminutive teenager with her hair in braids, holding a sign that read, “School Strike for Climate,” went viral, and she was soon joined by other students in Europe and around the world. German Fridays for Future activists were visible throughout the summer preceding the 2021 Bundestag election, critiquing the platforms of the major German parties and demonstrating for adherence to the Paris climate goals. They declared that only the platforms of the Greens and the Left Party would approach those goals. While the Greens did not escape the activists’ criticism, Baerbock’s designation of 2021 as the “climate election” won their outspoken approval.

These were not the only climate activists to achieve a high profile in the run-up to the election. On 30 August, a group of six young adults calling themselves the “Last Generation” set up camp near the Reichstag building in Berlin and began a hunger strike. They demanded a public discussion with all the chancellor candidates on the creation of a citizen advisory council for climate protection measures. None of the candidates, they asserted, had responded adequately to the climate crisis, and they would continue their strike until such a response was forthcoming. Ultimately, several of the strikers would be taken to the hospital, and the discussions they demanded would not be granted in advance of the election. Robert Habeck met with them a few days before the vote, but he could not convince them to end their strike.

Activists appeared at campaign events away from the capital as well. On 16 September, Union candidate Armin Laschet’s appearance in Bremen was interrupted by climate protesters. On 24 September, the Friday before the election, Fridays for Future held a global climate strike that included actions in more than 400 German cities and towns, including a large demonstration in Berlin featuring prominent activists Greta Thunberg and Luisa Neubauer. On this day, the two *Volksparteien* both tried to seize the initiative on climate issues. SPD candidate Scholz lambasted the Green-led state government in

Baden-Württemberg for failing to build out renewable energy more quickly. CDU/CSU candidate Laschet said it had been clear to the Union for a long time that “we in Germany have to show that we’re the fastest, that we’re the best, that we have the best technologies to shift our entire economy to climate neutrality.”¹⁰ For her part, Green candidate Baerbock visited the Fridays for Future demonstration in Cologne, reiterating that there should be no doubt that this election was a “climate election,” that the time for half measures was long past, and that the leadership on this issue belonged to her party.

The cascading disasters and high-visibility activism helped maintain the salience of climate change as a campaign issue. Climate began as the second-most cited issue of the campaign in voter polls, behind pensions and the social system and ahead of the economy and jobs. In June 2021, 44 percent cited it as one of the top three issues. It peaked in July at 50 percent, the same month as the flooding, and declined during the last month of the campaign to just over 46 percent. All told, it remained the second-most cited issue throughout the campaign season.¹¹

The fact that the climate issue did not rise to even greater heights after the dramatic events of the summer does not mean that the public had become indifferent. Manfred Fishedick, scientific managing director of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy and a lead author of the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report, explains that the fact that climate is not constantly front and center has to do with its change in status from a niche issue to a mainstream one. Every major political party except the AfD featured ambitious climate goals in its platform. Fishedick says, “The differences are in the question of how these goals are to be achieved—which measures will be used, which instruments. And this is a very technical question for an election campaign.”¹² Getting into the weeds on this issue, in other words, would not make good headline politics. While it was clear to climate activists that only the Greens and the Left offered programs that would keep the Paris Agreement goals within reach, to the general public it looked like nearly everyone cared about climate. This may be one reason the Greens’ support declined over the course of the campaign despite the continued high salience of their signature issue. The Left, too, failed to get a bounce in the polls from its strong stand on climate.

The Vote and Its Aftermath

The 2021 vote demonstrated the continuing dealignment of German voters from the center-right and center-left *Volksparteien*. At 25.7 percent, the SPD

was the only party even to exceed 20 percent of the vote on the second ballot, which determines the number of seats a party will receive in parliament. The final result was a gain for the SPD, Greens, and FDP and a debacle for the Union, which failed to win a single age category. The gap was widest among first-time voters, who broke evenly (23 percent) for the Greens and the FDP, while the SPD (15 percent) and Union (10 percent) trailed, with all other parties falling under 10 percent.¹³ In general, younger voters voted for the Greens, who won the most support among 18- to 24-year-olds (23 percent) and 25- to 34-year-olds (21 percent). Voters who favored climate action trusted the Greens most on this issue, but also gave some support to the SPD and other parties. The SPD received the most votes in all of the older age categories.¹⁴ Those on the outer edges of the party spectrum—the Left Party and the AfD—lost support relative to 2017.

The current Bundestag cohort is the youngest ever, with an average age of 47.5. According to a *New York Times* report, while about one in seven members of the previous parliament were under 40, in the new group it is roughly one in three, the youngest being a 23-year-old member of the Greens. The Bundestag is still predominantly male, with the percentage of women rising only slightly, from 31 percent to 34 percent. Still, it is the most diverse federal parliament ever. According to sociologist Klaus Hurrelmann, the demographic shift may cause some conflicts in the institution: “We have a generational rift, a very stark polarization that didn’t exist before: It’s the under-30s vs. the over-50s.”¹⁵

The Greens were the only party to pick up votes from all of the other parties. They gained the greatest number from the Union (920,000) and the Left Party (480,000). Despite this historically high percentage, they ran a distant third to the SPD and the Union. The Left Party, which had arguably taken the strongest line on climate, sank to 4.9 percent on the second ballot and only entered the parliament at all on the strength of its three direct mandates.

The result raises several important questions with regard to the parties’ stands on climate. First, why did the CDU/CSU not benefit more from Chancellor Merkel’s climate leadership? The Union suffered from a widespread impression that its momentum on climate issues had stalled in recent years. In the closing days of the campaign, the SPD even ran against its own record in the coalition on this issue. Environment Minister Svenja Schulze (SPD) painted her Union partners as a “hindrance” to climate progress, citing as examples the lagging expansion of renewable energies and the failure of carbon price cost-sharing proposals between renters and landlords.

Additionally, CDU/CSU chancellor candidate Laschet was a poor choice to take up the climate mantle. While serving as minister-president of North

Rhine-Westphalia, he had been accused of escalating conflicts between energy giant RWE and protesters in the Hambach Forest. Located between Cologne and Aachen, this is a stretch of old-growth forest that sits atop a lignite coal deposit owned by the company. Protesters had staged a years-long occupation of the site, which came to a violent end in 2018 with a widely condemned police action that was later ruled by a court to have been illegal. Laschet was unwittingly recorded admitting that he had sought a “pretext” for clearing the forest to facilitate strip mining.¹⁶ Laschet further damaged his climate credibility in the aftermath of the July 2021 floods when he was filmed laughing and joking during a visit to a ravaged area of his own state. A spoof campaign poster quickly appeared showing a mirthful Laschet in front of a flooded village, with the slogan, “Perfect, I wanted to demolish these villages for lignite mining anyway!”

Another question raised by the vote is why, if the outgoing coalition was judged weak on climate, the SPD came across relatively favorably. Scholz did campaign as a new “chancellor for climate” (Figure 1), but he had not been known previously as a strong advocate for this issue. He managed to square the circle by focusing on the socially just buildout of renewable energies—a pro-industry, pro-growth framing that still enabled him to appeal to some

Figure 1: Poster Promoting Candidate Scholz as the “Chancellor for Climate Protection”



of the SPD's traditional supporters while painting the Greens' approach as overly prohibitive and the Union's as stale.

Given the strength of public opinion in favor of climate action, it is not immediately clear why the AfD took such a contrary stance. As one scholar points out, the percentage of Germans disputing the existence of human-caused climate change is smaller than the AfD's support; even some of its voters disagree with the party's position on the climate issue.¹⁷ The pro-fossil fuel rhetoric may resonate with voters in lignite mining regions, but the ubiquity of this position in the party's campaigns at all levels, from state-level to EU elections, indicates that its primary source is a strong nationalist ideology that rejects the very premise of global or international interests.¹⁸ A new study also proposes that the AfD was trying to stake out a position in anticipation of increasing societal polarization over climate measures as they begin to require sacrifices from the German public.¹⁹

The election result also reflected the failure of the parties that were more closely aligned with the climate issue to capitalize on its salience. The Left Party, for example, took the strongest early stand on a timeline for achieving climate neutrality. Why didn't this action pay off more? The answer seems to be that the party lacked a track record on the issue and was thus viewed with suspicion by some of the very voters it had tried to attract.²⁰ The Greens matched the target set by the Left Party and enjoyed much greater credibility on climate.

That brings us to perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the election result. Given the events of the summer and early fall that kept climate in the public eye, why did support for the Greens drop off so much during that time? Yes, the party ultimately achieved its best result ever in a federal election, but Baerbock had at one point been *leading* in the polls. A likely explanation is that her popularity, and her subsequent drop, had only partially to do with the climate issue. Her youth, which at first had seemed a comparative advantage, began to look more like a lack of preparedness for office when she stumbled in her responses to accusations regarding an inflated résumé and plagiarized passages in her book. She seemed consistently blindsided by the negative press that many thought she should have anticipated.

Other problems aside, climate figured in the Green party's drop in two ways. First, it reflected the Greens' inability to capitalize fully on their signature issue. Their slogan, "ready because you are," may simply not have been true of the older portion of the electorate. The Greens were unable to shift the media narrative about climate away from issues of short-term costs and societal restrictions and toward a discussion of the societal benefits that would result from the party's brand of rapid climate action, not to mention

the enormous medium-term costs of inaction.²¹ The questions in the “triell” debates demonstrated to a wide audience that the Greens were losing the framing war with regard to climate.

Second, in this federal election, everybody really was talking about climate. The fact that they are no longer alone in their strong climate advocacy means that, going forward, the Greens will have to compete for public support among voters for whom climate is particularly salient. By the same token, the Greens will have to become more competitive with regard to other issues in order to grow their support. They must continue to develop credible signature positions on the entire spectrum of political issues, some of which may be less popular than their climate positions.

The area in which the activism of the summer aligned most closely with the result was the youth vote. The most visible climate activists were young, and the Greens polled best among young and first-time voters. What does it mean, though, that the Greens split the youth vote so closely with the FDP, whose approach to climate policy is much more hands-off? Hurrelmann explains it simply: “Young people want change and these two parties got the change vote.”²² Green voters put climate first, while FDP voters put freedom first. These were the top two issues for the under-25s. As two of the three members of the incoming governing coalition, the Greens and the FDP were now in a position to determine just how these two approaches could be reconciled. They wasted no time in doing so.

The Climate Profile of the Traffic Light Coalition

The leaders of the Greens and the FDP made headlines by meeting with each other before entering into coalition talks with the larger parties. This move sent the message that they would not be played off against each other. Indeed, together with the SPD, they tried to develop an approach to the climate issue that foregrounded the most visible positions of all three—social justice, climate protection, and innovation. The resultant red-yellow-green coalition agreement gave climate advocates a good deal of what they had wanted in the 2021 election. It moved the exit from coal to 2030 (but added the caveat “ideally” to the target date). It included a rapid restart of Germany’s stalled renewable energy expansion. Most importantly, it elevated the 1.5°C temperature rise limit from the Paris Agreement to the status of a guiding goal in federal policymaking.

The distribution of ministries provided some additional information regarding the climate emphases of the new coalition. The FDP achieved its primary

goal with the appointment of Christian Lindner as finance minister, which strengthened its emphasis on free market innovation as opposed to regulation. The FDP also heads the Federal Ministry of Transport, a key piece of the climate policy puzzle that was heavily criticized for its inaction during the Merkel administration. For their part, the Greens lead a new “super-Ministry” for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, with Robert Habeck at the helm. It is responsible for renewable energy, the power sector, energy networks, and federal climate law. During the red-green coalition government at the turn of the century (1998–2005), responsibility for renewables had been moved from the Economics Ministry to the Environment Ministry largely because the former was seen as an advocate for the fossil fuel industry and had been slow to embrace the *Energiewende*. The Merkel administration moved it back to the Economics Ministry in 2013, a change that was viewed by activists as a blow to renewable energy interests. Although the Greens did not get their wish that the “super-Ministry” should have the authority to review all federal policy initiatives in light of the 1.5°C limit, they did ensure that climate and economy receive equal billing in a single ministry, a signal that the Scholz administration conceptualizes them as integrated parts of a whole rather than competitors.

Additionally, in a move that surprised some observers, longtime Greens leader Cem Özdemir was tapped to head the Ministry for Food and Agriculture. This ministry has tended to align with conservative farm interests and to conflict with the Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety, and Consumer Protection. With the Greens now directing both, they may be able to work more cooperatively toward a climate-friendly agricultural policy.

Going Forward: Climate Action in a Time of War

The cohesiveness of the traffic light coalition with regard to climate and economy would soon be tested. Economic Affairs and Climate Action Minister Habeck introduced a proposal for a *Sofortprogramm für Klimaschutz* (Immediate Climate Action Program) in early 2022. It was designed to boost the energy transition by removing some of the obstacles that had slowed the buildout particularly of onshore wind facilities. While it included ambitious goals for the expansion of renewable energy sources, including setting aside 2 percent of federal territory for wind installations, the SPD criticized Habeck for neglecting the social consequences of climate action in his initial presentation. The Greens and the SPD both favored general compensation (*Klimageld*)

to the population to offset high energy prices, but they disagreed on how to calculate the amount. Federal Transport Minister Volker Wissing (FDP) soon came under fire for failing to follow through on the coalition agreement with regard to promoting electric vehicles, introducing speed limits, and strengthening EU fleet standards for carbon emissions.

Habeck was troubled by the previous administration's strong support for a controversial new pipeline, Nord Stream 2, which would transport Russian natural gas, intended as a "bridge fuel" during the energy transition, under the Baltic Sea to Germany. The original Nord Stream pipeline from Russia had been inaugurated in 2011, and the new one was ready to go. As Russia amassed troops on its border with Ukraine, unrest grew in Germany over the prospect of increasing energy dependence on a belligerent power. On 22 February, the Scholz administration halted the certification process for the project. Two days later, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Nord Stream 2 was for all intents and purposes dead, and Nord Stream 1 was likely to fall out of the picture as well.

Minister Habeck found himself in the unenviable position of having to scramble for alternative bridge fuels while implementing his ambitious climate program. Inevitably, climate took a back seat to energy security. Under the Merkel administration, Germany had become extraordinarily dependent on Russia, not only for natural gas (Nord Stream 1 and the planned Nord Stream 2), but also for oil (34 percent). After some back and forth on dates as fuel prices rose and inflation threatened to hobble the world economy, the government settled on the goal of ending gas imports from Russia by the fall of 2022 and oil imports by the end of that year.²³ Achieving this goal would require not only securing new natural gas and oil sources, but also repowering coal-fired power plants and possibly even extending the life of Germany's few remaining active nuclear power plants beyond their 2022 shutdown deadline—choices no leader of the Greens would have supported a few months prior.

Interestingly, the trade-offs seemed not to erode popular support for the Greens. A ZDF survey dated 15 July found that 95 percent of respondents identifying themselves as Green supporters agreed with the proposition to "continue to support Ukraine despite higher energy prices at home."²⁴ The next highest was the SPD with 83 percent; the FDP was in fourth place with 69 percent, a point below the average for the entire survey. Overall, support for the Greens was up relative to September 2021, while SPD and FDP support had dropped.

As of late August 2022, the Immediate Climate Action Program had yet to be approved. Individual action programs were introduced for the building

and transport sectors, both of which had missed their emissions reduction goals under Germany's federal climate law for 2021. The transportation plan was deemed by the federal Council of Experts on Climate Change to deviate so substantially from the requirements for CO₂ reduction that it did not qualify as an immediate action plan under the law.²⁵ All was not gloomy in the transport sector, though. In the spring, the federal government announced the "9 Euro Summer," a wildly popular policy whereby travelers in Germany enjoyed unlimited passage on local and regional public transportation for 9 Euros per month during June, July, and August.

The year 2022 brought fresh reminders of the urgency of the climate crisis. Europe suffered its hottest summer on record, along with wildfires in Spain, France, Romania, and Portugal.²⁶ Disruptive climate action also expanded during this time. The Last Generation may have failed to secure a conversation with the top candidates during the 2021 campaign, but its hunger strike garnered a following among German youth. In 2022, the group, now several hundred strong, began attaching themselves to busy streets and highways with superglue at rush hour in a number of large German cities.²⁷ Similar groups in Britain and Italy have been gluing themselves to paintings in major museums in order to bring attention to the urgency of climate issues.

In sum, the 2021 federal election campaign unfolded against the backdrop of an accelerating climate crisis that kept the issue high on the public agenda and compelled all participants to address it in some way. No party was able to "capture" the climate vote, not even those that made it their main campaign issue. On the one hand, the result reveals that all major German parties except the AfD have adopted climate as a major issue and enjoy some credibility on it. On the other hand, the result shows that societal consensus is still lacking on just how to address climate change. It also shows a significant and widening age gap in German politics that is becoming visible in the Bundestag itself and in forms of political activism. The new political energy is split between a youth-led grassroots movement for climate action that favors the Greens and one centered on a vague notion of "innovation" and the charisma of a youthful FDP leader, whose signature positions are very much in line with drivers of the fossil fuel-based economy. Reconciling this split in a time of broader political instability presents an ongoing challenge to the SPD-led coalition government.

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CAROL HAGER is a Professor of Environmental Studies and Political Science at Bryn Mawr College. Her research focuses on citizen participation in energy and land use politics. She is the author of *Technological Democracy: Bureaucracy and Citizenry in the German Energy Debate* (1995) and co-editor of *NIMBY Is Beautiful: Cases of Local Activism and Environmental Innovation around the World* (2015), *Germany’s Energy Transition: A Comparative Perspective* (2016), and *Becoming TransGerman: Cultural Identity Beyond Geography* (2019).

Notes

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