

# Change to Stay the Same? German European Preference Formation During the COVID-19 Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

In 2020, the German government supported the COVID-19 recovery fund 'Next Generation EU', which according to many observers is breaking with the taboo of joint EU debt liability. In this article, we analyse whether this decision marks a programmatic shift towards fiscal integration, taken in isolation by the Chancellor, or whether it can be reconciled with higher-level principles that guided the Chancellor's previous European policies? Our analysis builds on a synthetic framework combining a multi-level principal-agent account with ideational components. The empirical analysis of Bundestag debates and original public opinion data reveal that the support for 'Next Generation EU' neither breaks with the Chancellor's established 'conservational-pragmatic' approach to EU policy-making, nor separates the Chancellor from the preferences of the Bundestag and the public. Content analyses show how the government and its supporting camp in the Bundestag justified the apparent policy shift, underlining a strong agreement towards strengthening the EU in times of an unseen crisis, while at the same time revealing some noteworthy partisan differences.

## Introduction

In the early hours of 21 July 2020, the European Council reached a compromise on the 'Next Generation EU' programme, foreseeing grants and loans of up to 750 billion Euros to support the member states of the European Union (EU) in their fight against the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The programme has been described as a 'landmark spending package' that would guarantee a 'groundbreaking stimulus to fight the Coronavirus recession' (Matina Stevis-Gridneff in *New York Times* of 20 July 2020). Moreover, in a radical shift from the past, the European Council decided that Next Generation EU would be, to a large part, financed through the joint issuance of bonds. It thus breaks with the taboo of joint EU debt liability

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(see also Haffert and Seelkopf in this special issue for an overview of the EU's novel fiscal response to the pandemic).

According to most observers, Next Generation EU became possible only after France and Germany reached an agreement on the general outline of a COVID recovery fund in May 2020. While the details were largely worked out by the European Commission, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who held the Council Presidency during the second half of 2020, played a key role in brokering an intergovernmental compromise between the so-called 'frugal four' (i.e. Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden) and those states that wanted the EU to engage in greater public spending. Thus, the Chancellor, who had not objected against largely uncoordinated closures of borders during the first months of the pandemic and who had not mentioned Europe in her televised speech on the crisis on 18 March 2020, assured that the EU was able to take robust action to fight the pandemic's worst economic and social effects.

Next Generation EU appears to break with Merkel's past policy stance. During the Eurozone crisis, the Chancellor – largely influenced by a reluctant public (Degner and Leuffen 2020; Schneider and Slantchev 2018; Schoeller and Karlsson 2021) – had been opposed to joint EU debt titles, going as far as stating that there would be no Eurobonds for as long as she was alive (Peter Blechschmidt in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 28 June 2012). Have we thus witnessed, in Merkel's penultimate year in office, a programmatic change in Germany's position on EU integration?

In this article, we analyse whether Next Generation EU marks a decisive break with the policies of the previous Merkel governments. Can the pandemic policy shift be reconciled with the 'hard core' or higher-level principles of Merkel's previous EU policy? Moreover, did the Chancellor take a monocratic decision to support Next Generation EU? Or did the decision reflect a change in the boundaries of what was politically feasible in Germany?

We argue that rather than programmatic change, continuity dominates in Angela Merkel's approach to European integration. We diagnose an overarching objective of keeping the EU and its member states united, of preventing further disintegration. We show that Merkel has pursued this goal not by laying out grand programmatic visions for the future of Europe, but by carefully navigating domestic constraints that limit her bargaining space at the EU level. We refer to this as a 'conservational-pragmatic' style, as opposed to a 'programmatic-progressive' approach to EU policy-making.

Our theoretical framework synthesises insights from established theories of European integration to present a framework for national preference formation that operates across three levels. Domestically, the Chancellor is constrained in her policy choices by the preferences of her two principals, voters and parliament. The preferences of the two principals form policy corridors,

from which the Chancellor can pick a policy according to her ideas about the right course of action for the EU. The corridors thus provide the Chancellor with some (limited) space for (ideational) leadership. Empirically, we rely on a qualitative content analysis of key plenary debates in the German Bundestag in 2020 and 2021. We examine how Merkel justified her proposal for a pandemic recovery fund to the Bundestag and the German public and study how members of parliament (MPs) debated the proposal and subsequently the ratification of Next Generation EU. We supplement our analysis of the parliamentary debates with original survey data on public support for Next Generation EU in Germany.

We find that Merkel justified her policy shift by highlighting the risks of disintegration and the need to keep the EU from breaking apart, not least considering Germany's own economic interests. In contrast to the Eurozone crisis, Merkel was able to frame the COVID-19 pandemic as an external shock, for which no member state was to blame. Such a 'deservingness' logic (Alesina and Angeletos 2005) helped justify the development of a new fiscal instrument and reconciled it with the fiscally conservative position of Merkel's CDU/CSU party. We find that the Chancellor's framing of the situation was widely adopted by MPs from her ruling coalition and the pro-European parts of the opposition. However, MPs from the CDU/CSU tended to emphasise the unique crisis situation and the one-time nature of Next Generation EU. The conciliatory stance of the Bundestag reflects public opinion, which, throughout 2020, displayed high satisfaction with Merkel's handling of the pandemic and was, as our survey evidence shows, generally going along with Merkel's policy change.

We, therefore, conclude that Merkel's policy change on joint EU debt is in line with what we call her 'conservational-pragmatic' approach to EU policy-making. To stabilise the EU in moments of crisis, Merkel has been able to identify and justify solutions, which lie within the constraining corridors of parliamentary majorities and public opinion. Her final term in office was therefore not characterised by a radical change in her positioning towards EU integration. However, the policy had to change to enable paradigmatic continuity.

### **The Three Levels of National Preference Formation on EU policies**

In this section, we sketch out our understanding of German EU policy-making. Our framework synthesises various approaches to national preference formation from different integration theories, including liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1993, 1998), national partyism (König 2018), ideational approaches (Parsons 2002), and post-functionalism (Hooghe and Marks 2009).<sup>1</sup> The synthesising of different models allows us to get a

more encompassing and theoretically inclusive understanding of the mechanisms and contours of national preference formation in Germany.

Our account takes into consideration three levels of domestic preference formation. We distinguish (i) the societal, (ii) the parliamentary and (iii) the executive levels. These levels are ordered according to multi-level or nested principal-agent relationships. The principal-agent account mirrors the formal rules of the game, in as much as citizens vote for members of the Bundestag, who then elect the Chancellor to form a government. We argue that the principals are collective actors, who offer policy corridors from which the agents can pick their preferences. In this perspective, agenda setting is usually delegated to the agents.<sup>2</sup> We assume that agents cannot easily change the principals' policy preferences, at least not in the short term. Despite the possibility of agency loss (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Powell 2019), we assume that the agents' room for manoeuvre is limited and that – drawing on notions of formal and informal ratification (Immergut 1992, 3; Milner 1997; Tsebelis 2002, 81) – the principal is in the position to sanction the agents if they overstretch their competences. Therefore, the agents must carefully screen the principal's preferences and must assure that, technically speaking, their selected policy falls into the principal's win-set.

At the societal level, we can distinguish citizens and interest groups. Liberal intergovernmentalism builds on the logic of collective action (Olson 1965) and has stressed the importance of economic interest groups. However, in response to post-functionalist critiques (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2009) and in light of growing politicisation (de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016; Kriesi 2016), liberal intergovernmentalism today acknowledges more explicitly the impact of public opinion on national preference formation (Moravcsik 2018). Integrating citizens into the liberal intergovernmentalist model is unproblematic, as the theory assumes office-seeking governmental actors (Moravcsik 1993). With the rising salience of European politics, intensified by recent crises, the impact of citizens has increased vis-à-vis the organised interest groups (see also Culpepper 2012). Empirically, the impact of public opinion has been demonstrated by Degner and Leuffen (2020) for German preference formation regarding Eurozone reforms; Hager and Hilbig (2020) more generally show that the German executive carefully scrutinises public opinion. Moreover, the growing literature on government responsiveness underlines the importance of the societal level for understanding EU policy-making (Hagemann, Hobolt, and Wratil 2017; Schneider 2018; Wratil 2019).

Parliament constitutes the second level of our framework. For the case of Germany, we can limit the analysis to the Bundestag, given the secondary role of the Bundesrat in EU affairs. The Bundestag is classified as an active and institutionally strong parliament when it comes to EU affairs (Auel,

Rozenberg, and Tacea 2015, 79). Following Neuhold and Smith (2015, 678), Abels (2016, 130) describes the Bundestag as a ‘policy shaper’ and a ‘government watchdog’ in the area of European politics. The Bundestag ‘aims to create a large degree of publicity which forces government officials into coherent behaviour in order to keep the faith of the electorate’ (Rozenberg and Heffler 2015, 32). From such a perspective, the parliament forms a hinge between the societal and the governmental levels.

As the role of public opinion and thus electoral considerations have become increasingly prominent in the process of national preference formation, so has the role of the parliament, both as an aggregator of public opinion and as an arena for party political contestation. Vote-seeking MPs can be assumed to be in greater proximity to the public mood than the executive. Therefore, the corridor established by the Bundestag can be considered to also approximate the public win-set. According to König (2018), the importance of national parties has risen relative to economic interest groups and consequently, national preferences for EU policies should reflect the party ideology of the governing coalition. Parties and MPs thus make use of parliamentary debates to signal their convictions to both the electorate and the executive. In recent years, prominent Bundestag debates have engaged with questions on the future of Europe, migration and Eurozone policies, revealing diverging preferences both between coalition and opposition parties, and amongst the coalition parties themselves (Beichelt 2015; Freudlsperger and Weinrich 2021; Oppermann and Brummer in [this issue](#); Wendler 2011, 2014, 2019; Wonka 2016). The policy-seeking behaviour of parties and MPs also becomes apparent in the voting stage of the parliamentary process. Degner and Leuffen (2016) show that members of the Bundestag display a surprisingly strong degree of independence when voting on financial assistance to other EU countries during the Eurozone crisis: fiscally conservative MPs from coalition parties frequently deviated from their party line. Meanwhile, pro-EU opposition MPs supported bailout programmes negotiated by the German government. This has given the government some leeway in navigating the ‘shifting’ parliamentary corridor.

The executive constitutes the third level of national preference formation. We here rely on the model of ‘prime ministerial government’ (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990), given the ‘high politics’ nature of the policies under concern. In Germany, this finds its expression in the ‘Kanzlerprinsep’, which derives from the ‘Richtlinienkompetenz’, i.e. the power to determine policy guidelines, as stipulated in Art. 65 of the Basic Constitutional Law. The Chancellor thus plays a central role in determining the positions Germany defends at the European negotiation table. In doing so, the Chancellor must take the societal and parliamentary corridors into account. To determine which positions the Chancellor picks from these corridors or win-sets, we can draw on constructivist or ideational accounts of preference formation. Following

Parsons (2002, 2003) we assume that political leaders have ideas about the right policies to be pursued in the EU. We can build on a large literature, which aims at understanding and characterising the European policies of heads of state and government, including German Chancellors and Angela Merkel, more particularly (e.g. Bulmer 2014; Müller and Van Esch 2020; Van Esch 2012).

Chancellor Merkel's leadership style has been characterised as 'process-oriented' and 'purposeful', rather than 'ideological' (Middelhoff, Schijvenaars, and De Landtheer 2017). While some authors praise the Chancellor for having provided guidance to the EU in times of crisis (e.g. Bulmer 2014), others diagnose that Merkel's leadership style 'rests predominantly upon the electoral vector [...] rather than on the vectors of expertise or ideology' (Van Esch 2017, 228). While some blame the Chancellor for failing deeper fiscal integration during the Eurozone crisis (e.g. Blyth 2013), others stress that she bridged domestic *ordo-liberal* constraints and the need for fiscal solidarity to prevent the Eurozone from breaking apart (Bulmer 2014; Helms, Van Esch, and Crawford 2019; Wendler 2019). In line with these authors, Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi (2021, 1343) characterise Merkel's leadership during the COVID-19 crisis as 'proactive and compromise oriented'. We follow these latter assessments and characterise Chancellor Merkel's European policy style as 'conservational-pragmatic', rather than 'programmatically-progressive'. Over a decade of crises, maintaining the EU's unity and averting disintegration has emerged as an overarching goal of her EU policies. She pursued this goal pragmatically, recognising and navigating domestic constraints and without offering an ambitious agenda for European reforms.

In sum, our framework allows us to account for the various levels and mechanisms of German preference formation on EU politics. The framework bridges rationalist and sociological institutionalist understandings of the decision-making process. In particular, the Chancellor can select policies on ideational grounds, however, the room of manoeuvre is limited by the policy corridors at the parliamentary and societal levels. In the empirical section of the article, we test whether the position taken by Germany during the COVID crisis actually breaks with the 'conservational-pragmatic' approach of the previous Merkel governments or whether continuity at this higher level is maintained.

## **Studying German Preference Formation during the COVID-19 Crisis – Methods and Data**

To explain Germany's support for the Next Generation EU programme, we empirically assess the three levels of national preference formation spelled out above. We provide evidence for the policy positions of the main actors at these levels, the Chancellor, party groups in the Bundestag and public

opinion. This stocktaking exercise allows us to evaluate whether Merkel broke with her past EU politics, or whether the support for Next Generation EU can be aligned with higher-level policy principles of the Chancellor.

Above we characterised the Chancellor's European policy approach as 'conservational-pragmatic', rather than 'progressive-programmatic'. We speak of conservational to highlight an approach, which aims at conserving and protecting current levels of integration (independent of 'conservative' policy content). A progressive EU policy, in contrast, strives for deeper integration or polity change in the direction of a European federation. A pragmatic approach is characterised by reacting to situational challenges, rather than anticipating and preparing the ground for future challenges. Finally, programmatic changes highlight a larger degree of policy continuity, as compared to pragmatic adjustments, which may be less stable. In the empirical analysis, we mostly rely on content analyses of speeches, but also inspect the policy-making process and outcome to establish whether the German government's policies during COVID can be aligned with its past 'conservational-pragmatic' approach, or whether a shift towards a stronger 'progressive-programmatic' account can be detected.

While our theoretical framework moves up the delegation chain from the principals to the agents, our analysis proceeds in the opposite way. In a moment of crisis, the agent has a first-mover advantage compared to the principal(s). Indeed, as we show in the analysis, in April 2020, the Bundestag was still reluctant to discuss the issue of fiscal solidarity with other EU member states. Only the Merkel-Macron proposal put the issue high on the German political agenda (cf. Crespy and Schramm 2021). We start by presenting the menu of policy choices available to the Chancellor in spring 2020. We then show how Merkel justified her policy shift, at her joint press conference with Emmanuel Macron on May 18 and in her Bundestag speeches of April 23 and June 18. We then relate her justification strategy to party political responses in the Bundestag.<sup>3</sup>

For the parliamentary level, we rely on qualitative content analyses of four Bundestag plenary debates from 2020 and 2021 (see Table 1). In

**Table 1.** Sample of Bundestag debates.

Date	Debate title	No. of speakers	Official plenary proceedings no.
23/04/2020	'Government statement on overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic'	17	19/156
18/06/2020	'Government statement on the German Council presidency'	13	19/166
01/07/2020	'German EU Council presidency: Strengthening Europe'	13	19/169
25/02/2021	'Ratification of the EU's Own-Resource-Decision'	13	19/212

Note: Plenary proceedings available at <https://www.bundestag.de/protokolle> (Accessed: 20/12/2021).

parliamentary debates, members of the executive outline and motivate their policy choices to the parliamentary principal and, indirectly, to the citizens. Before European Council summits, it is customary that the Chancellor delivers ‘Regierungserklärungen’, statements by the government to the Bundestag, laying out the government’s current EU policy positions (Wendler 2019, 502). MPs, in turn, signal and justify their own position-taking to both, the voters and the government. Importantly, plenary speeches also spell out the boundaries of the Bundestag’s ‘ratification corridor’. For 2020, we select three debates. The first one of 23 April 2020, precedes the Franco-German recovery fund proposal. The second debate of June 18 marks the start of Germany’s EU Council presidency. The government’s working programme for the Council presidency was again debated on July 1. Due to the parliamentary summer break, there was no Bundestag debate directly preceding the European Council’s decisive July meeting, when the agreement on Next Generation EU was reached. The Bundestag only returned to the issue on 25 February 2021, when it debated the ratification of both, Next Generation EU and the EU’s new multiannual budget. We also cover this debate and the subsequent ratification vote on 25 March 2021.

Finally, concerning the societal level, we provide information on public support for Next Generation EU for the German population and various subsets of voters. We present original survey data collected by the Cluster of Excellence on the ‘Politics of Inequality’, in Germany in November 2020. The ‘Covid-19 and Social Inequality’ survey programme was fielded using the Respondi online access panel, implementing quotas for age, gender, education and region. It includes 3,893 respondents<sup>4</sup> over the age of 18. Our survey data collection thus falls in between the first agreement on Next Generation EU in July 2020 and its parliamentary ratification by the Bundestag in March 2021. The timing was therefore well-suited for gauging the public’s reaction to Next Generation EU.

## **Analysis**

### ***The Chancellor in the Face of COVID***

In spring 2020, Europe became an epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic coincided with rising tensions on the design and composition of the EU’s next Multiannual Financial Framework, the negotiations of which were scheduled to be concluded during the German Council presidency in the second half of 2020. As lockdown measures and overburdened healthcare systems put severe strains on member state budgets, a debate about a common EU response to the devastating economic and social effects of the crisis emerged. Angela Merkel was confronted with two polarised positions. In March 2020, in a joint letter to European Council

President Charles Michel, nine member states, led by France, Italy and Spain, called for the issuance of joint EU debt titles, rebranding old proposals for ‘Euro Bonds’ as ‘Corona bonds’ (Daniel Dombey, Guy Chasan, Jim Brunsten in *Financial Times* of 25 March 2020). In contrast, the so-called ‘frugal four’ – Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands – took the strongest stance against any form of debt mutualisation. In this constellation, Merkel had three choices: Firstly, in line with the ‘frugals’ she could have continued her fiscally conservative stance from the Eurozone crisis, opposing any joint EU debt. This would have risked an expanding economic crisis, as poorer member states might have faced trouble in financing their national spending programmes. Moreover, in Italy, public opinion surveys showed rising Euroscepticism (Miles Johnson, Sam Fleming in *Financial Times*, 6 April 2020). Fuelled by the Eurosceptic populist 5-Stars-Lega government, Italy’s exit from the Eurozone seemed to become an increasingly realistic possibility.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Merkel could have given in to demands for Corona bonds. While this would have marked a drastic change in her fiscal policy stance, it seems unlikely that such a shift would have passed the Bundestag. A third option consisted in forging a compromise solution.

In April 2020, Merkel signalled to the Bundestag that she was reluctant to opt for the Corona bond option. The ‘Regierungserklärung’ on April 23 focused largely on the domestic COVID situation in Germany, despite taking place in the morning before a European Council video conference. Only towards the end of her speech did the Chancellor talk about European solidarity. Without making her opposition to Corona bonds explicit, Merkel referred to the alleged necessity of an EU treaty change to enable common EU debt. She thus used a procedural pretext to dismiss joint debt as unpractical. She explicitly named the Bundestag a veto-player in such a reform:

Let’s assume that the time and the political will for joint debt really existed: Then all national parliaments in the European Union and also the German Bundestag would have to decide to amend the EU treaties in such a way that parts of the budgetary law would be transferred to the European level and democratically controlled there. That would be a time-consuming and difficult process and not one that could directly help in the current situation; because what matters now is to help quickly and to have instruments quickly at hand that can alleviate the consequences of the crisis. (*Angela Merkel, 23 April 2020*)<sup>6</sup>

However, Merkel did acknowledge the need for more investments to support the economic recovery in the EU. She briefly outlined a position that can be read as a first basis for her recovery fund proposal: The introduction of a stimulus programme based on the EU budget and (re-)financed by higher budget contributions, including by Germany. Noticeably, the Chancellor did not yet include joint debt issuance as part of such a programme:

A European stimulus program could support the necessary economic recovery over the next two years. [...] We should be prepared, in a spirit of solidarity, to make, for a limited period of time, different, that is significantly higher contributions to the European budget. This is because we want all member states in the European Union to be able to recover economically. (*Applause from members of the CDU/CSU and the SPD*) However, such an economic stimulus program should be considered from the outset in conjunction with the European budget; after all, the common European budget has for decades been the central instrument of solidarity-based financing of common tasks in the European Union.

Retrospectively, it can be argued that Merkel tested the waters in the Bundestag. How would MPs react to the outline of higher budget contribution to finance pan-EU investments?

Three weeks later, Merkel and Emmanuel Macron gave a joint press conference outlining the Franco-German proposal for a recovery fund. Some observers have argued that the proposal may reflect the ideas and influence of SPD Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (e.g. Matthijs 2022; for an overall assessment of Scholz' influence on Germany's domestic and European fiscal response to COVID-19, see Haffert & Seelkopf in [this issue](#)). However, on the basis of elite interviews with senior officials involved in the process, Schramm (2023) shows that the proposal was, in fact, prepared and negotiated in the Chancellery (see also Crespy and Schramm 2021).

Indeed, we argue that the Franco-German proposal aligns with Merkel's 'conservational-pragmatic' approach to EU integration in two main ways. Firstly, the proposal breaks in a pragmatic way with past positions of the Chancellor, in face of an unseen situation and rising concerns over the future of the EU. Secondly, it sets out a recovery plan not only for the Eurozone but for the entire EU. Thirdly, the plan was based upon the EU's multi-annual budget, thereby tagging a 'natural time limit' to the programme. The proposal thus did not imply a lasting change for EU fiscal policy as desired by some Southern European member states. It did, however, provide a unique level of fiscal solidarity to overcome the economic consequences of the pandemic in the whole EU.

Merkel's speeches at the press conference and subsequently in the Bundestag shed light on the underlying impetus for her policy shift on EU debt. She explicitly voiced concerns over the unity of the EU, and she agreed to common EU debt to prevent disintegration of the EU (or at least the Eurozone):

The goal is for Europe to come out of this crisis stronger, by holding together and showing solidarity. We know that the impact of the virus on our countries differs and that there is therefore a risk that the economic impact of this virus will jeopardise economic cohesion, and unity in the European Union, which could risk the existence of the EU as we actually need her to be. (*Angela Merkel, 18 May 2020*)

And we will work resolutely to counter any risk of a permanent division of Europe. We must not be naive: The anti-democratic forces, the radical, authoritarian movements are only waiting for economic crises so that they can then abuse them politically. (*Angela Merkel, 18 June 2020*)

Speaking mainly to her German audience in the Bundestag, she further argued that fiscal solidarity amongst EU member states during the COVID-19 crisis not only serves the conservation of European integration but is, first and foremost, in Germany's self-interest.

But at the same time, we should not forget that our national measures will only be truly successful if the other EU member states are also strong and if our national action is flanked by European action (*Angela Merkel, 18 June 2020*)

Last but not least, Merkel employed a 'deservingness' heuristic (Alesina and Angeletos 2005), framing the pandemic as an external shock for which no country was responsible:

The coronavirus pandemic affects us all, through no fault of our own and unprepared, in Germany, in Europe and throughout the world. (*Angela Merkel, 18 June 2020*)

This marks a stark contrast to the Eurozone crisis, which the German government framed as a 'public debt crisis' resulting from years of fiscal mismanagement and a lack of structural reforms in the crisis countries. Thus, the Eurozone crisis was seen as having endogenous causes, for which hard hit countries were themselves responsible, while no member state had 'control over' the COVID shock.

In sum, we diagnose that the support for Next Generation EU, indeed, indicates a policy shift of the Chancellor. In particular, the taboo of joint European debt is overcome. However, the content analysis highlights that Merkel justifies her support for Next Generation EU with reference to the particular circumstances of the COVID crisis. This finding aligns well with the 'conservational-pragmatic' approach, associated with Chancellor Merkel in the literature. There is no strong evidence for a substantive programmatic shift (cf. also Schoeller and Karlsson 2021); the COVID-19 recovery programme is just that: a temporary limited recovery programme countering the shock of an unforeseen and exogenous crisis.

### ***The Bundestag – How to Align Change with Continuity***

In parliament, Chancellor Merkel received both encouraging and restraining reactions to her ideas on an economic response to the COVID-19 crisis, which she shared with the Bundestag on 23 April 2020. For her proposal of increased pan-EU investments, the Chancellor received applause by members of her governing coalition composed of Christian Democrats

(CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), a sign that such a proposal would not overstretch the Bundestag corridor. Even so, the CDU/CSU set out its limits on EU fiscal solidarity, opposing explicitly a mutualisation of debt.

Anyone who now stands up and calls for Coronabonds as the sole solution in view of the dramatic situation, is in fact endangering cohesion in Europe [...].  
(*Katja Leikert (CDU), 23 April 2020*)

But we must ensure that the crisis is not used as an excuse to forget about all past achievements regarding cohesion. Anyone who recklessly uses the crisis today to talk about general debt in Europe is endangering this European project. (*Alexander Dobrindt (CSU), 23 April 2020*)

In contrast, the SPD already at this point signalled an unconditional support for increased government spending to cope with the Coronavirus slump; also criticising the previous policies of the Eurozone crisis.

Because one thing goes without saying: Our partners, our friends in Italy, in Spain, in France and in other countries that are particularly affected cannot wait long. They certainly cannot wait for ideological debates about principles. They cannot wait and do not want to wait for lectures and know-it-alls. They don't want to wait at all for new austerity dictates that didn't work ten years ago, ladies and gentlemen. What they need instead is a solidarity-based recovery programme. (*Achim Post (SPD), 23 April 2020*)

Meanwhile, the opposition parties did not show a strong interest in the matter, indicating that at this stage the question over debt mutualisation was not perceived to be a top priority. Neither the Eurosceptic AfD, nor the fiscally conservative FDP responded to this point. The debate instead focused – like Merkel's speech – primarily on the domestic situation. Merely, the Greens showed their general support for a properly designed recovery fund to cope with the COVID-19 economic crisis, albeit without entering into much detail.

Hence, shortly before the Merkel-Macron proposal, the German Chancellor faced opposition to joint EU debt within her own party, while at the same time receiving encouraging calls for action from the SPD and Greens. Merkel's subsequent move towards a European recovery fund can thus also be interpreted as not only a European compromise but also as a compromise between her domestic coalition partners, as the temporally limited Next Generation EU programme also implied the prevention of permanent Euro Bonds and lasting structural change in EU fiscal policy.

The German-Franco proposal for a European recovery fund of 18 May 2020 put EU fiscal solidarity high on the Bundestag agenda. As the proposal deviates quite strongly from the previous positions of the CDU/CSU, the party faced a conflict between sticking to its previous positions and supporting the Chancellor's twist. The party decided for the latter. Conservative MPs' speeches largely mirrored Merkel's lines of argumentation; three key justifications dominate – EU disintegration risk, German self-interest, and

deservingness. Firstly, CDU/CSU MPs stressed the need for solidarity with other EU member states in times of crisis. Failure to respond adequately to the economic challenges posed by COVID-19 could have a devastating impact for the European project.

It is about much more. It is about cohesion, about solidarity. This is the European Union. (*Gunther Krichbaum (CDU), 1 June 2020*)

It is justified because doing nothing would be disastrous. Doing nothing would be disastrous not only for us as the Federal Republic of Germany – 60 per cent of our exports go to the European Union – but it would also be disastrous for Europe. (*Eckhardt Rehberg (CDU), 18 June 2020*)

Secondly, to grant additional weight to Merkel's justification of a disintegration risk, the CDU/CSU also connected European solidarity to German self-interest.

That's why the approach is good. From a purely mercantile point of view, we in Germany can say: Yes, these are all our markets. We therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that the countries around us do not become distressed. (*Gunther Krichbaum, 1 July 2020*)

And we, as Germans, will benefit the most, even if – yes, that's right – we pay in at least four times more than we will ultimately get back. (*Eckhardt Rehberg, 25 February 2021*)

Finally, to justify its shifting position concerning EU fiscal policy the CDU/CSU also echoed the deservingness discourse. Accordingly, financial support for economies in trouble was justified also from a fiscally conservative policy stance.

It makes a critical difference whether your neighbour is in trouble because he gambled away his paycheck or because he was affected by a disaster that was not his own fault. (*Alexander Dobrindt (CSU), 18 June 2020*)

These arguments strengthened Merkel's position, showing that her justifications were in line with her party opinion. The opening up of the CDU/CSU towards fiscal solidarity amidst the COVID-19 crisis created new policy space for Merkel, which was needed to strike a European compromise and conserve the EU as a whole.

From her social democratic coalition partner, Merkel received similar support. However, unlike the CDU/CSU, the SPD considered the shift in German EU fiscal policy to be a lasting paradigmatic shift. Indeed, social democratic Finance Minister Olaf Scholz opened the door towards more lasting change in EU fiscal policy.

Now, in this crisis, we have taken the step that we need to take to be able to move into a fiscal union. [...] In order to be able to give a strong response to the crisis, we will borrow as a union. (*Olaf Scholz (SPD), 25 February 2021*)

While conservative members of the *grand coalition* vehemently opposed such claims, stressing the temporary character of Next Generation EU, SPD MPs supported their Finance Minister's proposals for a fiscal union.

The cornerstones have been built here. Many thanks, Olaf Scholz, for taking the first steps toward a fiscal union. (*Christian Petry (SPD), 25 February 2021*)

And - I expressly contradict you at this point -: For us as the CDU/CSU, this is not the entry into a fiscal union, not the entry into a liability union and not the entry into a debt union ... Your goals, a mutualisation of debt in Europe, a liability union, that you can soon push through with a left-wing coalition, but not with the CDU/CSU in the German Bundestag. (*Eckhardt Rehberg (CDU), 25 February 2021*)

Despite general support for a European recovery package, the CDU/CSU thus defined its limits of European fiscal solidarity. Hence, on one hand social democrats moved the policy corridor towards a more solidary fiscal policy stance, by opening the door towards a fiscal union. On the other hand, conservatives framed their support for EU Next Generation as an exceptional decision in response to an unprecedented situation, justifying their decision primarily in terms of German self-interest and deservingness under an umbrella of keeping the EU together. Despite this tension, the parliamentary corridor had therefore shifted significantly as compared to the Eurozone crisis. Merkel now had more leeway to implement fiscal solidarity.

Among the opposition parties, we observe hesitant support for Next Generation EU among the liberal FDP, who questioned the composition and application of the recovery fund but largely supported the provision of financial assistance.

We can talk about Germany's contributions to the 750 billion euros in Corona aid and our contributions to the European Union budget. We should not immediately say: No, Germany will give nothing, and any increase is out of the question. But the question must be asked: What is the money being used for? (*Christian Lindner (FDP), 18 June 2020*)

Why not rely more on loans instead of grants? [...] More loans, fewer grants, more targeted and faster - that's how we will assess this presidency. (*Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, 1 July 2020*)

Meanwhile, the Greens enthusiastically supported Merkel's initiative, and, like the SPD, considered the shift in German EU fiscal policy as paradigmatic.

Particularly, the CDU/CSU and the German government have blocked this for a long time; there was a longstanding blockade by the German government against a common fiscal policy. This blockade has now been abandoned. This is a historic paradigm shift, and I expressly welcome it. (*Sven-Christian Kindler (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), 25 February 2021*)

Hence, the Chancellor was spared fundamental opposition from the pro-European parts of the opposition. On the contrary, the programmatic and progressive ideas of Greens and the pragmatic approval of the FDP contributed to an opening corridor towards fiscal solidarity. Thus, the positions of the Eurosceptic AfD, which voiced strong disagreement, and of the Left party, which neither supported nor opposed Next Generation EU, did not constrain the Chancellor.

In sum, the parliamentary debates echo the Chancellor's justifications for the shift towards stronger fiscal solidarity. In particular, the policy shift is legitimised by reference to the risk of disintegration, German economic self-interest and the situational criterion of deservingness. While the CDU/CSU MPs tentatively follow the Chancellor, their social democratic coalition partner more radically opened up the policy space towards increased fiscal solidarity. Hence, the policy corridor, within which Merkel had to manoeuvre, was defined by claims for stronger fiscal union by SPD and Greens on one end, and opposition to joint EU debt and lasting structural reform of EU fiscal policy by conservatives and liberals, on the other.

These results are reflected in the plenary roll call vote on the ratification of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–27, including Next Generation EU (Table 2). Eight 'no'-votes, one abstention and 21 absent MPs among the CDU/CSU indicate that within her own party Merkel enjoyed major but not unconditional support for her policy shift. The voting behaviour of the FDP paint a similar picture, indicating hesitant support for Next Generation EU. In contrast, both the SPD and the Greens display unconditional support for the policy. The large number of abstentions among MPs of The Left did not affect the policy corridor available to the government and neither did the AfD's general opposition to any form of European solidarity.

Merkel's leadership within this policy corridor reflects her 'conservational-pragmatic' style as she moved towards increased fiscal solidarity without fully abandoning her party's fiscally conservative principles. In such a perspective, Next Generation EU was a 'necessary evil' to hold the EU together in an unprecedented crisis. However, the temporary nature of

**Table 2.** Plenary roll call vote on the EU's multiannual financial framework 2021–2027, including next generation EU (March 25, 2021).

Party	Yes votes	No votes	Abstentions	Did not vote
CDU/CSU	214	8	1	21
SPD	139	0	0	13
AfD	0	78	0	10
FDP	61	4	12	3
Die Linke	1	0	59	9
B90/Die Grünen	62	0	0	2
Non attached	1	5	0	2

Source: <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/plenum/abstimmung/abstimmung?id=717> (Accessed: 16/12/2021).

the measures would safeguard a ‘back to normal’ once the crisis would be resolved.

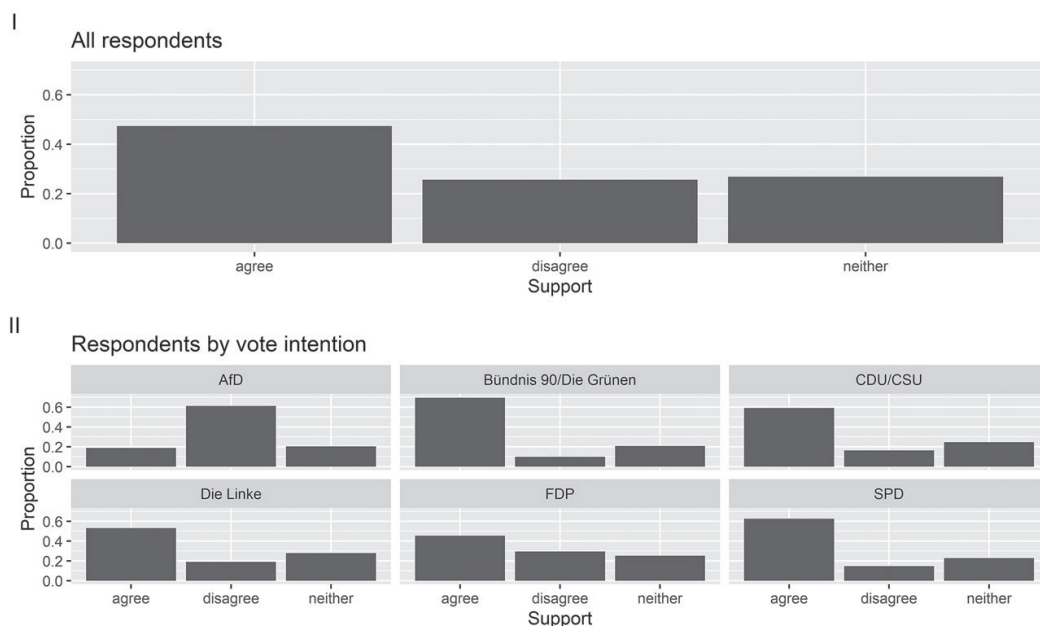
### **German Citizens in the Face of Rising Calls for European Solidarity**

So far, we have established that the Chancellor’s policy shift did not constitute a paradigmatic change of her approach to EU policy-making. Moreover, we demonstrated that Merkel acted within the constraining Bundestag corridor, choosing a policy, which was acceptable to a large majority of MPs. We now, as a last step, need to check whether Merkel, in her support of Next Generation EU, departs from support at the societal level.

For the Eurozone crisis, it has been argued that the Chancellor was largely constrained by public opinion, thereby partly deviating from demands of economic interest group which showed stronger support for aid measures (Degner and Leuffen 2020). In the COVID crisis, the economic interest groups again stressed the economic importance of joint EU measures. The influential industry group BDI – together with its French and Italian partner organisations – called for a resourceful European recovery fund already on 12 May 2020, i.e. before the Merkel-Macron proposal (BDI, Confindustria and MEDEF 2020). But what did citizens think about Next Generation EU?

Survey evidence underlines that Merkel’s policy shift remained within the limits of public opinion. Throughout 2020, Merkel was the most popular politician in Germany (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: Politbarometer). Our

Support for 'Next Generation EU' recovery program

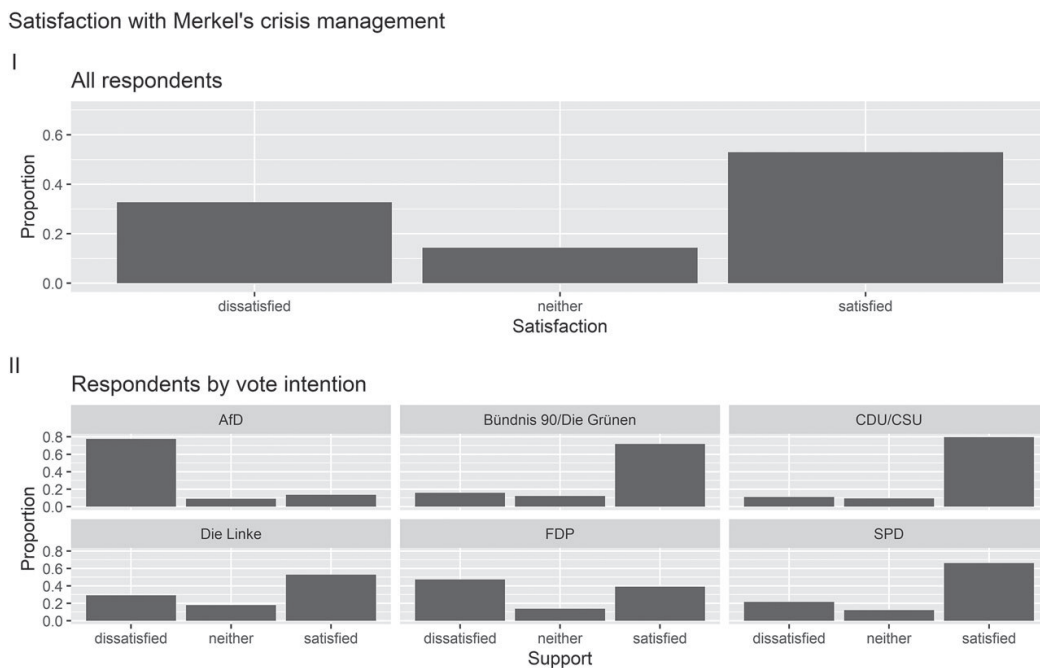


**Figure 1.** Satisfaction with Merkel’s crisis management among German citizens (November 2020,  $n = 3868$ ).

own survey data shows that in November 2020, 53 per cent of Germans were satisfied with her management of the pandemic (see Figure 1). 52 per cent of respondents expressed satisfaction with the federal government's management of the economic impact of the pandemic (see Figure S1). Merkel and her government enjoyed particularly high levels of support among CDU/CSU supporters, as well as among supporters of her junior coalition partner, the SPD.

We have also directly asked for support for the Next Generation EU programme (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> 47 per cent of respondents indicated their support. More respondents selected the 'neither-nor' category (27 per cent) than voiced their opposition (26 per cent). 60 per cent of CDU/CSU supporters agreed with the programme. Supporters of the SPD and the Greens expressed even higher levels of support. Likewise, an absolute majority of supporters of Die Linke supported the recovery fund. Opinions among supporters of the fiscally conservative FDP were more mixed but even among them, a relative majority agreed with Next Generation EU. Only the supporters of the Euro-sceptic AfD largely opposed the measures.

In sum, we do not find strong opposition towards Next Generation EU in the German population. Supporters of the governing coalition, in particular, expressed their support for the measures. Thus, Merkel's policy shift appears to have taken place within the corridor of public opinion.



**Figure 2.** Public support for Next Generation EU among German citizens (November 2020,  $n = 3884$ ).

## Conclusion

At the Chancellor's last European Council meeting in October 2021, Xavier Bettel, the Prime minister of Luxembourg, praised Angela Merkel as a 'compromise machine'. Our analysis largely corroborates this assessment – policy adjustments from all stakeholders around the European but also domestic policy-making table were necessary to make a joint European response to COVID-19 possible. The deal was largely brokered by the German Chancellor and French President Macron.

We argue that while Next Generation EU without doubt represents a policy change when compared to the policies of the Eurozone crisis, it still conforms to the Chancellor's approach to EU policy-making, which we classify as 'conservational-pragmatic'. The Chancellor – in line with her party – sees Next Generation EU as a temporary measure, to fight an unprecedented crisis. COVID was framed by the Chancellor as an external shock: The pandemic threatened not just to bring medical and financial systems in the member states to the brink of failure, but also risked the survival of the integration project itself, thereby endangering German economic and political interests.

Many analysts wonder whether Next Generation EU represents a critical juncture and a paradigm change in EU fiscal policy. For example, Haffert and Seelkopf in this special issue speculate whether a successful implementation of the recovery programme could create self-reinforcing policy feedback effects, solidifying joint debt as a crisis instrument in the EU. In contrast, our more actor-centred approach focuses on the process of national preference formation and highlights the domestic politics constraints on such mechanistic perspectives.

Indeed, our analyses of Bundestag speeches and of public opinion highlights that Merkel's policy shift during COVID-19 remained in line with large parliamentary majorities and within the corridor of what was politically feasible in Germany. However, the analysis also unveils differences between Merkel's coalition partners CDU/CSU and SPD. While the CDU/CSU insists on the temporary nature of the Next Generation EU measures, the SPD embraces the idea of a deeper integrated fiscal Union. These diverging perspectives set the stage for party political contestation the new legislative period (see also Oppermann & Brummer in this special issue). Whether the SPD will be able to substantiate its programme under Merkel's successor Olaf Scholz remains an open question. While the coalitional treaty of the new SPD-Greens-FDP government makes a number of bold claims, including the possibility of EU treaty changes, it remains to be seen, whether the pulls towards deeper fiscal integration will be fought back by the more fiscally conservative FDP.

In any case, we have no reason to assume that the general mechanisms of German European policy-making are likely to change in the future. The Chancellor does not act in a political vacuum but can exert his or her leadership only within the limits of the corridors of Bundestag and public opinion. In time of politicisation, European policy-making is always also domestic politics.

## Notes

1. National preference formation can be divided into the process and the output thereof, i.e., the preferences or ideal points, which the country's representatives defend at the European negotiation table. Following Bueno de Mesquita (2004), we do not make a distinction between positions and preferences or ideal points (cf. also Thomson et al. 2012; Wasserfallen et al. 2019).
2. Note that our understanding of corridors differs slightly from Finke (2009, 486), for whom the corridor for governmental positions is constituted by the economic characteristics of a country. Our corridor, however, is more political as it is determined by players in the political game. Of course, these players' preferences may well be influenced by economic considerations.
3. Private information confirms that the Chancellor informed a selected group of Bundestag members about her recovery fund plans, not least to check whether the parliamentary majority would back the policy shift.
4. In the analysis, we perform listwise deletion for missing values.
5. Using survey experiments Baccaro, Bremer, and Neimanns (2021, 2022) show in two recent studies that Italian respondents are more likely to support an Italian exit from the Eurozone when EU fiscal support is conditional on structural reforms.
6. All quotes translated by the authors. See appendix for German originals.
7. The question was worded as follows: 'As you may know, the EU member states agreed on a pandemic recovery plan in July 2020. In broad terms, this plan provides that the European Commission is, for the first time, allowed to raise debt on the financial markets for a limited amount of time and to a limited extent, and to distribute it to the member states under certain conditions. The money is supposed to be targeted on investments in forward-looking technologies. Do you support this measure?'

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