



Women Suffrage and Beyond

confronting the democratic deficit



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Angela Merkel: The Iron Mother

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(1954-)



Clinton and Merkel via US Embassy Berlin.

Angela Merkel, the first female Chancellor of Germany (since 2005) and leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is generally regarded as the most powerful woman in Europe and, given the power of Germany, one of the most powerful in the world. She has regularly topped *Forbes Magazine*'s list of the world's most powerful women.

Angela Dorothea Merkel was born to a teacher of English and Latin and a Protestant pastor and spent most of her early life in East Germany, making her an outsider in the politics of the unified Germanies. She

completed a doctorate in physics at the University of Leipzig in 1990. She has married twice, with the first marriage ending in divorce, and has no children. Her husband is a chemistry professor who largely rejects the limelight.

Merkel joined the pro-democracy movement after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. She was elected to the German parliament, Bundestag, in the first post-reunification general election in December 1990 and shortly thereafter took on a post familiar to many female politicians, heading the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) cabinet of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In 1994, her next position reflected her scientific training, Minister for the Environment and Nuclear Safety. In 2000, even as the CDU was engulfed in financial scandals and the reputations of possible rivals were compromised, she emerged as the reform-minded chairwoman of a party with a deep Catholic and masculinist history. She explicitly stated that she did not represent feminism (Ferree, 201-2).

In 2005, she formed a coalition government with the Social Democratic Party and was elected chancellor. In 2009, she was reelected in a coalition with the Free Democratic Party as a junior partner. Scholars have charted a significant shift in German views on female leaders. At the beginning of the 2005 campaign, “only 56 percent of women (and 37 percent of men) said in principle they approved of a woman being chancellor. By the end of the campaign 84 percent of women and 70 percent of men did” (Ferree 205).

As chancellor she has pursued what have been assessed as more “feminist” policies in “family and gender politics than the Red-Green coalition” she ousted (Ferree, 202). Her conservative administration treats “both contraception and unmarried motherhood ... as women’s reproductive rights” (Ferree 222). She has also overseen an active international role for Germany, including a prioritization of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the European Union (Mattox, 122- 125). In 2010 Merkel attracted attention for her announcement that multiculturalism in Germany had failed. Immigrants should instead adopt the dominant culture and values (Connolly). Her declaration returned to the spirit of an announcement she had made when opposition leader and president of the CDU in 2004 (Baudet, 170). The declaration from the chancellor reflected growing hardening of German and European attitudes to ‘foreign’ populations within their borders.

Angela Merkel has been variously dubbed the ‘Iron Chancellor’ (invoking her powerful 19th century predecessor Otto Von Bismarck), the ‘Iron Frau’ (invoking Britain’s Margaret Thatcher), and ‘Mutti’ (German familiar for mother). She has also been credited with substantial skills as an intellectual and consensus-builder. Not surprisingly, she regularly challenges caricaturists in a country with still conservative views of working women and motherhood (Kutch). Angela Merkel once again raises the question of why a significant number of female leaders rule from the right.

Further Reading & Resources

Baudet, Thierry. *The Significance of Borders: Why Representative Government and the rule of Law Require Nation States*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2012..

Connolly, Kate. “Angela Merkel Declares Death of German Multiculturalism,” *The Guardian*, 17 Oct. 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-germany-multiculturalism-failures>

Ferree, Myra Marx. *Varieties of Feminism: German Gender Politics in Global Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Kutch, Lynn Marie. “Angela Merkel Has More to Offer.” In *Women in the Media: Reinventing Women’s Lives*, Eds. Theresa Carilli and Jane Campbell. Lexington Books, 2012.

Mattox, Gale A. "Germany. From Civilian Power to International Actor." In *the Future of Transatlantic Relations: Perceptions, Policy and Practice*. Eds. Andrew M. Dorman and Joyce P. Kaufman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

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Who We Are

We are based at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Our team consists of [Dr. Veronica Strong-Boag](#), Canadian historian in the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice and Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, Grace Lore, PhD student in Political Science, Tiffany Johnstone, recent doctoral graduate in English from UBC, Kelsey Wrightson, PhD candidate in Political Science, and [Kelly Christensen](#), MA candidate in Asia Pacific Policy Studies at the Institute of Asian Research.

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