

POLITICS

THE WHIPPERSNAPPER

It should have been a crushing defeat, for the cause and for him personally. Kevin Kühnert wanted to prevent the center-left Social Democrats (SPD), the party whose youth organization he leads, from voting to reboot their current coalition with Angela Merkel's center-right Christian Democrats (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU).

In September 2017, the SPD had suffered its worst showing in a Bundestag election since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949: 20.5 percent. After Merkel's negotiations with the Greens and the free-market Free Democrats (FDP) faltered, the SPD was left alone as the only potential partner for the Union. The sole conceivable alternative would have been new elections, which all center parties were against – not least out of concern that the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) would most likely prove the beneficiary. The SPD thus entered into negotiations. Yet before a coalition could officially be formed, there would have to be a vote among party members. 463,722 eligible voters were summoned by the party in spring of this year for a binding vote: Yea or Nay. Kühnert's moment had arrived. The 29-year-old mobilized the Jusos (short for *Jungsozialisten*, or Young Socialists, the youth division of the SPD since 1904) in opposition. Kühnert appeared on all the talk shows, gave newspaper interviews, traveled across all of Germany and spoke

at dozens of regional conferences. His style was calm and matter-of-fact, without the revolutionary pathos for which many of the former chairs of the Jusos were known. "We've found almost 1,000 uses of the words 'want' and 'would like' in the coalition agreement," was one of the most repeated quotes from Kühnert's roadshow. This was "the utmost vague formulation" of a political project. The SPD can no longer trust the CDU, Kühnert preached to his comrades.

Ultimately, at the end of March, two-thirds of party members voted for continuing the coalition with Merkel; only one-third voted Nay with Kühnert. And yet the Juso chief emerged from the debate in an even stronger position than before. Kühnert had, as they say in politics, enhanced his profile. He has become a national celebrity and is now the friendly face of the future. This is more than a question of content, it's about self-confidence in a party at odds with itself, from which voters are fleeing, although the party believes it has crafted consistently successful policy as part of the Grand Coalition since 2013. In recent polls it garnered barely 18 percent. Incidentally, Gerhard Schröder – later German chancellor – and Andrea Nahles – the current head of the SPD – both began their paths to party chief as Juso chair.

THE CROWN PRINCE

He is already well along the path that both friend and foe agree may one day land him in the German chancellor's office. Angela Merkel appointed the 38-year-old Jens Spahn to her cabinet this year, if only to the often rather thankless post of health minister. The Christian Democrat has been a member of the Bundestag since 2002, when he became the youngest directly elected representative in the history of the Federal Republic. Spahn has been an inconspicuous politician over the years, a proficient healthcare policymaker and pension expert who sat on all the relevant technical panels, commissions and party committees. But all that changed in 2015 – with the refugee crisis and Merkel's response to it. When German politics descended into confusion, Spahn set out on a course opposite that of the chancellor. "If within a year far more than a million refugees and emigrants enter Germany, this will radically call into question many of the things we currently hold to be certain," he wrote. "We are experiencing a disruption of our state."

Although that was aimed at Merkel, it fell short of an open declaration of war; Spahn senses that, even if the chancellor were to resign tomorrow morning, it's still too early for him to take over. But, in terms of his critics, Spahn has positioned himself to the right of Merkel, and has thus become the new hope of conservatives within the CDU, who won't (or can't) topple the chancellor, but are ever less shy about openly longing for the end of her era. The abolition of mandatory military service, the phase-out from nuclear power and the euro-bailout scheme

considered too generous – these were the intra-party points of criticism against Merkel that prevailed before her admission of war refugees three years ago. In interviews, Spahn has continued to cling to catchy and, some feel, provocative assertions: the current level of social assistance is enough to live off, he says; he called demonstrators at the G20 summit in Hamburg "left-wing fascists"; and he considers it vital to impose a strict ban on Muslim women wearing a full-face veil.

Spahn had probably taken into account the appalled reactions of the left, which played right into his hand, giving him more publicity and making him even more beloved by the party's right flank. This allowed the budding star of the Christian Democrats, raised in Ahaus but a stone's throw from the Dutch border, to avoid being seen as a throwback to the gnarled, conservative CDU politicians of the 1960s.

Just as Kühnert in the SPD, Spahn is readily sought as a speaker by local CDU groups all across Germany. He never forgets to mention that he is gay. Gay and conservative – sometimes still considered a contradiction, even in 2018. The admission indeed helps Spahn levy his criticisms of political Islam and his warnings against the immigration of too many Muslims by equating them with often openly aggressive homophobic attitudes. Spahn's bold confession shields him in bourgeois circles from being registered as too far to the political right.

In 2021, Merkel will have been in office for 16 years, equaling Helmut Kohl's run in the 1980s and 1990s. It remains highly probable that she will decline to run for a fifth term. Spahn will then be 41 years old, older than Emmanuel Macron when he was elected president of France.



Robert Habeck, Sahra Wagenknecht, Kevin Kühnert and Jens Spahn (left to right)

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NEW KIDS ON THE BLOC

Four upstarts are upending German politics. *The German Times'* editor Lutz Lichtenberger takes stock of their prospects to define the nation's politics for the years ahead

THE FIREBRAND

The time horizon of Sahra Wagenknecht's political career is wide open. Wagenknecht, co-chairman of the Left Party's parliamentary group, began a project this summer whose goals and potential effect on the landscape of German political parties has Berlin's political class scratching its collective head. The 49-year-old hopes her movement, #Aufstehen, or #Rise Up, will foment a coalition movement that – for now – claims to stand for election not as a party, but rather something like a movement. The movement is directed at all three parties that are left of center, including her own Left Party, which was cobbled together from the remains of the SED – the state party of the former GDR – and a West German spin-off from the SPD called Labor and Social Justice – The Electoral Alternative. In 2017 the Left captured 9.2 percent of the vote, good for 69 seats in the Bundestag. Wagenknecht would like to win over SPD followers for whom the Social Democrats have become too neoliberal and all too content to be bedfellows with Merkel's CDU as well as Greens supporters who suspect that their party is on a steep decline towards becoming a free-market FDP with an ecological appendage.

Wagenknecht is a figure as flamboyant as she is controversial. After finishing high school in 1988, Communist Germany deemed her "not fit for the collective" and denied her permission to study at university. In early summer 1989, when the GDR was in its final death throes, Wagenknecht joined the SED anyway, just when all who could were fleeing the party as quickly as possible and wanted nothing more to do with socialist ideals. Over the next two decades, Wagenknecht became one of the best-known figures in the party without ever making inroads into the Left's power centers. She knew how to rhetorically shine in talk shows while distinguishing herself as the author of numerous books on economic policy, whose intellectual content puts them leagues above other such works published by politicians. Wagenknecht was criticized

within the party as aloof and all too concerned with her own interests. But no one could keep pace with her in terms of how she was perceived by outsiders; before long, she became the face of her party.

In 2010 Wagenknecht finally managed to climb into the party leadership and reached the pinnacle of the caucus in 2015. That period also featured a liaison and then marriage with former SPD chief and Minister of Finance Oskar Lafontaine, 26 years her senior and for years one of the most dazzling figures in left-leaning German politics.

#Aufstehen does not see itself as a party, but rather a movement intent on influencing the public debate while aligning the SPD, Greens and the Left Party on a common, bolder course oriented more to the left. However, her rhetorical ventures of recent years indicate that Wagenknecht is seeking even more. Her cautious yet targeted statements have distanced herself from her party's line and the dominant attitude on the left in all matters related to immigration. As far back as 2016 she said: "That there are limits to the population's receptiveness is a simple fact, and that our capacity for absorption is not unlimited is another. Coming to these conclusions is neither left nor right, but rather a banality."

Wagenknecht has never lost sight of the "little people" that constitute the voter potential of the left-of-center parties, from which many Germans have since strayed sharply to the right, embracing the AfD and their rhetoric of resentment. It is a similar issue as in the US: Have the progressive parties – the SPD in Germany, the Democrats in the US – been focusing on the "wrong" themes, on identity politics, and neglecting the real economic concerns of the lower middle class?

The calculus behind #Aufstehen, however, may extend beyond political sentiment. In the Bundestag elections in 2013, the SPD, Greens and the Left Party constituted a majority and would have been able to build a coalition (in 2017 the three combined for a mere 38.6 percent.) But the SPD could never bring itself to entertain an alliance with the SED heirs in the Left Party, whose opposition to NATO was one of the chief arguments against a partnership with the SPD. The new movement is sure to lower the threshold now separating one party from the next.

THE GREEN HOPE

While Sahra Wagenknecht may be the most familiar face of the new Left, her contemporary, Robert Habeck, the newly elected co-chairman of the Greens, is getting ever more popular. He is targeting the political center. Above all, it is Habeck's style, often considered nonchalant, that is now shaking up his party from within while delivering the Greens some excellent poll results. At 15 percent, the party currently enjoys third place, ahead of the AfD and only 3 percentage points behind the SPD.

In a political environment shaped by failures on the left and on the right, how did Habeck succeed in bringing consensus to a party with a strikingly anti-populist, rather exhausting and above all ecologically demanding platform?

The 49-year-old, who until September was environment minister in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany's northern-most state, has managed the same feat as his three contenders: They are all new faces with fresh ideas expressed in their very own voices. Even if it's sometimes just a repackaging of old concepts, the charm of the new is working its magic.

Unlike in the US, political careers in Germany are determined by party structures. It is difficult for outsiders to break in; the path to the top winds through many intermediate stages and, as a rule, is quite a long one – extraordinary personalities seldom endure. When in 2016 the Greens first held a primary on the American model to select their two chairs, Habeck lost by a hair. Two years later he was elevated to lead the party without a vote among members.

Together with Annalena Baerbock (the Greens traditionally elect one woman and one man to the party leadership), Habeck toured the country this summer. His central message was such: "The center is where the majority forms." It's about shifting the

center back towards liberal democracy, progressive and ecological policy. "We want to make the Greens' positions capable of winning a majority. This is a rebuke of the scaremongers and an invitation to the dispirited to gather courage. We can change politics."

In recent years, the Greens have been stuck right in the center of the party spectrum; they were potential partners of the SPD and the Left Party on one side of the aisle, and no longer just the secret dream partners of Angela Merkel and the CDU on the other. In 2013, the party rejected the chancellor's offer to join in forming a government. In 2017, during negotiations with Merkel's Union parties and the FDP, the Greens were lauded for their creative ideas and pragmatism. But at the last minute the Free Democrats pulled out of the talks. The Green dream of reclaiming government responsibility after nearly 20 years was shattered.

Habeck is now the star attraction of a party that functions in programmatic harmony like no other, yet sees no clear path back to power. Or conversely: it's the party that tomorrow could be courted by potential partners from across the full spectrum of German politics.