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Economist

Germany's leader

## The constant chancellor

Angela Merkel may not look as strong as the German economy does—but she will still be hard to topple

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EVERY year the German Language Society selects a word of the year and an “unword”, usually something somebody said but should not have done. *Wutbürger* (irate citizen) was the word for 2010. The unword was *alternativlos* (no alternative), as in “the bail-out of Greece was *alternativlos*.” These choices capture something of Germany’s mood these days.

*Wutbürger* refers to Germans who are angry about huge infrastructure projects, among other things, and disenchanted with conventional party politics. *Alternativlos* suggests a sense of frustration and resignation.

*Aufschwung* (economic upswing) might have deserved a mention but did not get one. In 2010 the economy grew at its fastest rate since unification, and unemployment dropped to its lowest level since 1992. Real incomes are rising after years of stagnation. In December 45% of Germans were confident about the coming year and only 11% felt trepidation, says one survey. Other rich countries are studying Germany’s recipe for success with some envy.

In most countries voters would give their government credit. In Germany things are more complicated. Angela Merkel’s coalition, which took office in October 2009, is widely seen as a disappointment. The three-party alliance—consisting of Mrs Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sibling, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Free Democratic

Party (FDP)—has bickered openly and steered uncertainly in its first year or so in office. If an election were held now the coalition would lose its majority.

Yet that negative verdict needs nuance. The coalition's weakest link is the liberal FDP and its abrasive leader, Guido Westerwelle, who also serves as foreign minister. The FDP has struggled to adjust to the responsibilities of government after 11 years in opposition. Support for the Christian duo is about where it was in 2009 (but, given the flight of voters from the FDP, it should surely be higher). And Mrs Merkel herself remains more popular than her government. Some 67% of voters approve of her performance.

This is not new. In voters' eyes Mrs Merkel outshone her previous government, a "grand coalition" with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The SPD was ejected in 2009, but voters chose to keep Mrs Merkel on. Even the opposition suspects that the same may well happen in the next federal election in 2013. In this Merkel era, coalition partners are like mathematical variables: conceivably the SPD or even the high-flying Greens could replace the FDP as the conservatives' allies in government. The one constant is the chancellor.

The opposition lacks artillery. The SPD is still seeking a remedy that might arrest its long-term decline. Its leader, Sigmar Gabriel, is not a credible alternative to Mrs Merkel. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the former foreign minister, would be more formidable. But German voters tend to unseat chancellors only when they are angry, not because they embrace the challenger. The Greens could conceivably displace the SPD as the second-strongest party, but they too lack a candidate to match Mrs Merkel. The ex-communist Left Party is a mess. A coalition of the three left-of-centre parties seems far-fetched.

In Mrs Merkel's camp, chieftains with the stature to challenge her leadership have recently left politics (Christian Wulff, the former premier of Lower Saxony, became federal president last year). Their successors lack experience or independent power bases. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the charismatic defence minister, is Germany's most popular politician and a potential chancellor. But he is young and his route to the top is through the CSU. His handling of a series of minor scandals has dulled his sheen, at least temporarily.

The strong economy will buoy Mrs Merkel, even if earlier governments deserve more credit for it than the present one. Less obviously, she may benefit from pockets of rage and resignation. Her administration has looked more purposeful ever since it challenged rebels against an ambitious rail project in Stuttgart, the original *Wutbürger*. The CDU brands them enemies of progress and mocks the Greens, political home to many rebels, as the "party of no". The Greens' opposition to Munich's bid to host the 2018 Winter Olympic Games was "a step too far", reckons Klaus-Peter Schöppner of TNS Emnid, a pollster.

For citizens fed up with or merely indifferent to party politics, Mrs Merkel's style is a good fit. A cerebral, level-headed former physicist, she operates in the background, unlike her attention-grabbing SPD predecessor, Gerhard Schröder. Yet she comes across as approachably ordinary rather than forbiddingly professorial. "She's popular because she doesn't cut herself off from people," comments one SPD politician. "She seems relatively normal."

With no domestic crisis to force divisive reforms on Germany, Mrs Merkel thinks she can just nudge the country forward. The euro crisis is another matter. Her stubbornness in defence of German interests may have angered her euro-zone partners and unsettled the markets, but it

has also brought grudging political consent whenever stubbornness has yielded to compromise. When Mrs Merkel sees no alternative, people tend to believe her.

She has been through politically rough patches and may encounter more. She has been damned for maintaining radio silence rather than sending clear messages, for balancing factions rather than leading, for leaning left when her party yearned for a rightward tilt. She will be tested by seven regional elections this year. The results could wound her. But, for now at least, Mrs Merkel seems to be *alternativlos*.

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