



eupinions brief | November 2021

After Merkel

Europeans' attitudes as the EU awaits a new German government

During Angela Merkel's time as Chancellor, the European Union as well as Germany's role in it has changed. How do Europeans view German leadership as the longterm German and European leader prepares to step away from power?

Catherine E. de Vries, Professor of Politics, Bocconi University
Isabell Hoffmann, Senior Expert, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Introduction

2021 marks the end of Angela Merkel's 16 year chancellorship. In her time, the image and role of Germany as a major European player has changed. Starting as the first female German chancellor, Germany transformed from being the "sick man of Europe" (unemployment mounted to more than 11 per cent in 2005) to the "European economic powerhouse" (with an unemployment rate of 6 per cent today). At the European level, German pragmatism and politics of pulling through via small steps has been simultaneously praised as a willingness to compromise and a way to shape benevolent German leadership on the continent. Yet at the same time, German leadership has also been criticized for lacking a clear vision for the future of the European project.

While the handling of the 2015 refugee crisis and the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe has been praised by many for its strong commitment to international solidarity at a time of increasing nationalism (Noack, 2016), the austere approach of the German government during the sovereign debt crisis and its lacklustre response to democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland have encountered fierce criticisms (Matthijs and Kelemen, 2021). Against this backdrop, this report aims to understand how Europeans view the European legacy of Angela Merkel's chancellorship and German leadership within the EU more generally. These are important questions as any new federal government will need to define its own role in the EU and to live up to the citizens' expectations.

This report seeks to shed light on these topics by presenting evidence based on a survey conducted in June and July 2021 in which just under 12,000 EU citizens were interviewed.

Specifically, we rely on two sets of data. One set is aimed at capturing the contours of public opinion in the EU27, while the other completes the picture with a more in-depth focus on respondents from the seven individual member states: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. Finally, we also subdivide our data from these seven member states based on the political parties that respondents support. Doing so allows us to examine how partisan leanings might be associated with different views about German leadership within the EU generally.

This report is divided into four parts. First, we examine the knowledge European citizens have about European political leaders, and how this knowledge differs across European member states. Second, we explore how European citizens evaluate the legacy of chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership at the European level, and how these evaluations differ across EU member states and party supporters. Third, we investigate how European citizens view German leadership at the European level more generally and how this differs across EU member states and party supporters. Finally, we close by reflecting on how European citizens' views about chancellor Merkel's legacy and German leadership more generally structure the room to maneuver for the next German chancellor and what this might mean for the future of the European project.

Knowledge about European Political Leaders and German Party Leaders

In a first step, we explore the knowledge European citizens have about European leaders, including chancellor Angela Merkel. Specifically, we asked respondents if the names of European political leaders listed in Table 1 sounded familiar to them. The percentages reported in Table 1 reflect the share of respondents who answered that the name of the political leader was indeed familiar to them. The results suggest that within the EU27 chancellor Angela Merkel is the best-known politician. 84 per cent of European respondents say that they are familiar with chancellor Merkel. French president Emmanuel Macron and British prime minister Boris Johnson

are also very well-known among European citizens. 74 and 75 per cent of European respondents state that they are familiar with president Macron and prime minister Johnson respectively.

Table 1

EU27: Knowledge of European Leaders

In percent

	EU27	Belgium	France	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	Poland	Spain
Merkel	84	82	82	93	85	73	88	85
Macron	74	79	87	77	77	57	72	68
Johnson	75	73	69	76	76	65	63	77
Rutte	19	54	7	25	17	85	16	14
Orban	42	41	20	56	40	30	63	21
Sanchez	35	29	26	29	36	17	36	89
Draghi	35	29	22	43	87	26	14	46
Morawiecki	15	6	4	12	8	7	89	8
None	4	5	4	2	4	5	4	3

June 2021

eupinions | what do you think?

Table 1 also shows the level of the knowledge that respondents have about European political leaders in seven selected member states. It should not come as a surprise that respondents are most familiar with their own national political leaders (like prime minister Mark Rutte for Dutch respondents or prime minister Mario Draghi for Italian respondents), but in light of this it is perhaps equally surprising that chancellor Merkel is equally known as the respective main national political leaders. The Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, and the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte are the least known European political leaders.

Evaluations of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Legacy at the European Level

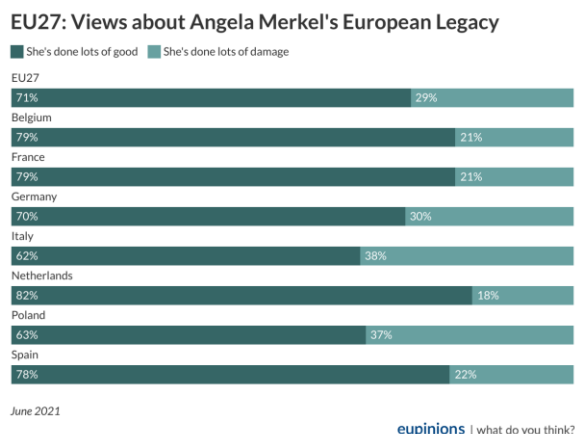
Overall, the results of table 1 suggest that chancellor Angela Merkel is by far the best-known political leader in Europe. This likely reflects her 16-year-long chancellorship. Against this backdrop, we now turn to the question of how European respondents evaluate the legacy of her chancellorship. Specifically, we asked respondents the following two questions about the European legacy of chancellor Merkel:

- “The German chancellor Angela Merkel has been in power for 16 years. She is leaving office this autumn. What do you think about her European legacy? Respondents could choose between the following answer categories: ‘she

has done a lot of good’ or ‘she has done a lot of damage’”.

Figure 2 displays how European respondents evaluate the legacy of Angela Merkel’s chancellorship and how this differs across seven member states. Overall, European respondents think that chancellor Merkel has done more good than damage at the European level. 71 per cent of European respondents think that she has done lots of good at the European level, while only 29 per cent think that she has done lots of damage. That said, Figure 2 also suggests that there are differences across member states. Interestingly, Dutch, Belgian, French and Spanish respondents evaluate chancellor Merkel’s European legacy even more positively than German respondents. Yet, even though a majority of Italian and Polish respondents think that chancellor Merkel has done more good than harm, the share of those who think that chancellor Merkel has done lots of good at the European level is substantially lower in Italy and Poland compared to other member states. 62 per cent of Italian respondents and 63 per cent of Polish respondents respectively think that chancellor Merkel has done lots of good, while 38 and 37 per cent of Italian and Polish respondents think that chancellor Merkel has done lots of damage at the European level.

Figure 2



In our eupinions survey we also ask respondents if they feel close to a political party and if so to which one. Now, examining the evaluations of chancellor Merkel’s European legacy across different party supporters in each of the seven member states that we study more in-depth, we

find that most party supporters across the different member states evaluate the European legacy of chancellor Merkel quite positively. Yet, there are four clear exceptions. The majority of supporters of the German far right Alternative for Germany, the Italian far right Brothers of Italy (Fdi), the Dutch far right Forum for Democracy (FvD) and the Polish right conservative protest party Kukiz (Kukiz’15) think that chancellor Merkel has done more damage than good at the European level. 75 per cent of Alternative for Germany supporters think that chancellor Merkel has done lots of damage at the European level, 56 per cent of supporters of Brothers of Italy supporters, 59 per cent of Dutch Forum for Democracy supporters and 67 per cent of Kukiz supporters feel the same. All numbers across the party spectrum for all seven individually polled countries, can be found here for [France](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Netherlands](#), [Poland](#), [Spain](#) and Belgium ([Flanders](#) & [Wallonia](#)).

Evaluations of Germany’s Leadership at the European Level

Overall, Figures 2 in the previous section suggest that chancellor Angela Merkel is evaluated quite positively among European respondents, even though some differences between member states and party supporters exist. Now in a final step, we examine the way European respondents view German leadership at the European level more generally. Specifically, we asked respondents the following two questions about German leadership at the European level.

- “Germany is often seen as taking a leadership role in the European Union. Do you think this is very good/good or very bad/bad?”
- “Many political decisions are today taken at the European level. In your opinion, how much influence does Germany have on European decisions? Respondents could choose between the following answer categories: ‘no influence’, ‘some influence’, ‘a lot of influence’”.

Figures 3 and 4 show how European respondents generally evaluate Germany’s leadership at the European level. Figure 3 suggests that 63 per

cent of European respondents view Germany's leadership role in the European Union as generally positive, while 37 per cent of European respondents view it as negative. Substantial differences across member states exist, however. A majority of Italian and Polish respondents view German leadership in the European Union as negative. 55 and 53 per cent of Italian and Polish respondents state that they think Germany's leadership role in the European Union is bad or very bad, while 45 and 47 per cent think it is good or very good.

Figure 3

EU27: Views about Germany's Leadership in the EU

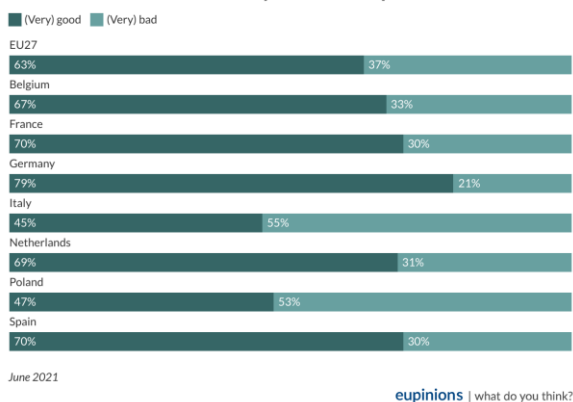
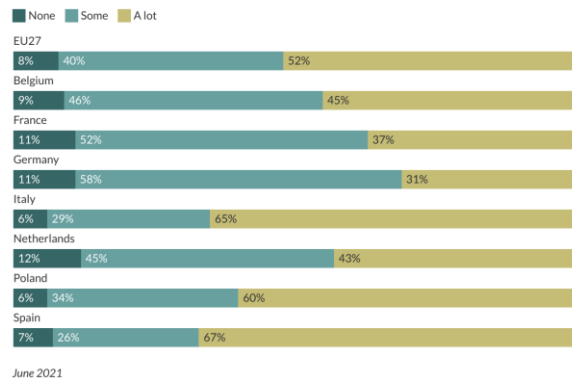


Figure 4 examines the extent to which European respondents think that Germany has influence in European decision-making. Overall, 52 per cent of European respondents think that Germany has a lot of influence in decision-making at the European level, while 40 per cent think that it has only some influence, and only 8 per cent of European respondents think that Germany has no influence at all. Again, substantial differences exist across member states. While a majority of Italian, Polish and Spanish respondents think that Germany has a lot of influence on European decisions, a majority of Belgian, French, German and Dutch respondents think that Germany only has some influence on European decision-making.

Figure 4

EU27: Views about Germany's Influence in the EU



Again, interesting variations apply across the party spectrum of the seven countries polled individually. Like it was the case for evaluations of chancellor Merkel's legacy, most party supporters across the seven different member states view German leadership at the European level quite positively. However, there are four clear exceptions. The majority of supporters of the German Alternative for Germany, the Italian Brothers of Italy, the Dutch Forum for Democracy and Polish Kukiz evaluate German leadership at the European level largely negatively. Only 47 per cent of Alternative for Germany supporters think that German leadership with EU decision-making has generally been good, while 22 per cent of supporters of Brothers of Italy supporters, 35 per cent of Dutch Forum for Democracy supporters and 34 per cent of Polish Kukiz supporters feel the same. All results split by party supporters can be found here: [France](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Netherlands](#), [Poland](#), [Spain](#) and Belgium ([Flanders](#) & [Wallonia](#)).

Interestingly, the supporters of these parties vary quite substantially in the way they view the influence of Germany in European decision making, however. While only 22 per cent of supporters of Alternative for Germany think that Germany has a lot of influence in European decision-making, 81 per cent of Brothers of Italy supporters think that Germany has a lot of influence at the EU level, and 61 per cent of the Dutch Forum for Democracy as well as 58 per cent of supporters of the Polish party Kukiz think the same. Results for party supporters in [France](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Netherlands](#), [Poland](#), [Spain](#)

and Belgium ([Flanders](#) & [Wallonia](#)) can be found here.

Discussion and Conclusion

Germany's role in the EU has evolved greatly since Angela Merkel took office: From the sick man of Europe to the reluctant hegemon to team player in the fight against COVID-19. Despite the great crises and deep conflicts that characterized her tenure, the appreciation of Angela Merkel as a political leader in Europe as well as the esteem for Germany's role in the Union has stayed quite high in European public opinion. We first asked respondents about Germany's role in the EU in summer 2015. Even at the height of the Eurozone debt crisis, 55 per cent of EU citizens viewed Germany's role in the Union as positive. This number has increased to 63 per cent today.

Merkel's successor will be able to build on that. All political parties in Germany having a chance of being part of the next federal government have a pro-European integration agenda. Differences remain mostly in the field of fiscal policy and are accumulated around the questions of whether debt mutualisation is acceptable and how to balance the demands of financial stability and public spending. A future German coalition government will need to integrate these different positions and necessarily come up with a compromise on how to advance European politics despite the differences. After all, these issues will be on the forefront of European politics independently of where the next crisis will hit. They will also continue to shape citizens views about German leadership in the EU. Whatever stance a future German government will take, the greatest risk is a repeat of the Euro crisis management. Being perceived as the veto player turned out to be a thankless role for Germany. It certainly made for great nick names (Mrs. No) but tanked the country's reputation in some parts of the EU to this day among certain subsets of voters (populist right in Italy). Whether or not future German governments will be able to shape European politics along their convictions and interests will also depend on their reputation among citizens in the EU. The shadow of Germany's history is long and dark enough to easily stir up resentment. All this considered, it is

remarkable how positive German leadership is viewed in large parts of Europe today. Ultimately, it is important for the future German government to understand how best to wield their influence. How the new German chancellor will be viewed by European citizens will largely depend on it.

References

Matthijs, Matthias and R. Daniel Kelemen (2021) The other side of Angela Merkel. *Foreign Policy*, 9th of July.

Noack, Rick (2016) How Angela Merkel, a conservative, became the 'leader of the free world'. *The Washington Post*. November 21, 2016

Data note:

The sample with a size of n=11,849 was drawn by Dalia Research between 17.06.2021 and 15.07.2021 across all 27 EU member states, taking into account current population distributions with regard to age (14-69 years), gender and region/country. In order to obtain census representative results, the data were weighted based upon the most recent Eurostat statistics. Calculated for a sample of this size and considering the design-effect, the margin of error would be +/-1 % at a confidence level of 95 %.

Imprint:

© November 2021
Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Responsible:

Isabell Hoffmann
Phone: +49 30 275 788 126
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de