German Politics

ISSN: 0964-4008 (Print) 1743-8993 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fgrp20

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To cite this article: Ludger Helms, Femke Van Esch & Beverly Crawford (2019) Merkel III: From Committed Pragmatist to 'Conviction Leader'?, German Politics, 28:3, 350-370, DOI: 10.1080/09644008.2018.1462340

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1462340

Published online: 03 May 2018.

Merkel III: From Committed Pragmatist to 'Conviction Leader'?

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For most of her political career Angela Merkel has been perceived as a pragmatic political leader, avoiding tough and divisive decisions wherever possible, and joining decision-making coalitions on contested issues when they emerged. To some extent, this remarkable ability appears to explain her extended hold on the German chancellorship. In the midst of her third term, however, her behaviour changed suddenly and unexpectedly, or so it seemed. When in July 2015 the euro crisis flared up again due to the standoff between Greece and its EU partners on the second bail-out, Merkel let her European convictions prevail and backed another support package against the wishes of many in her party. Moreover, when Germany was hit by a wave of refugees only a few months later, Merkel became the torch-bearer of a 'culture of welcome' and defended her 'open-door' policies with a measure of conviction that few observers would have considered possible. This paper looks at Merkel's leadership performance during her third term through the lens of the concept of 'conviction leadership', and inquires if, or to what extent, Merkel can be meaningfully considered a 'conviction leader'.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the start of Angela Merkel's chancellorship in late 2005, even moderately optimistic observers did not dare to think beyond a possible Merkel II government (see Thaysen 2006). However, things worked out exceptionally well for Merkel. The aftermath of the 2017 Bundestag election saw a chancellor celebrating her 12th anniversary in office, and preparing for her fourth term – a spectacular achievement even by German standards as the country is marked by an exceptional durability of post-1945 top political leaders.

Comparative research on extended premierships suggests that individual terms of long-term political leaders may differ in terms of policy achievements and perceived success (Strangio, 't Hart, and Walter 2013). This is certainly true also for Merkel. Most observers would agree that the interlude of the Christian–Liberal government (2009–13), 'framed' by two grand coalitions (2005–09 and 2013–17), was Merkel's least successful term yet – in particular when judged against the heightened public expectations facing this government (see, for example, Helms 2011, 2014a; Mushaben

German Politics, Vol.28, No.3, 2019, pp.350–370
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1462340

2016). However, while the performance of political leaders is set to change over time, in particular if they come to face major changes to the complexion of the government, as in Merkel's case, the overall style of a leader tends to be more or less stable over time. Leaders are believed to be able to 'reinvent' themselves – by adapting to changing circumstances or, possibly, by learning from their own mistakes – though within certain limits. Merkel's established perceived profile, which marked the first decade of her chancellorship, and dominated decennial assessments, was that of a decidedly pragmatic leader, with few, if any, issues close enough to her heart to put her power status on the line.[1] Viewed through the conceptual lens of the recently introduced leadership capital index approach, Merkel long managed to keep an impressive stock of leadership capital essentially by not spending it on any controversial and politically 'costly' issue (see Helms and van Esch 2017).

Compared to 2005 and 2009, Merkel started her third term with a notably strong 'personal mandate' (to the extent that parliamentary elections can be considered to vest top candidates with personalised electoral legitimacy). The 2013 Bundestag election witnessed the largest proportion of voters yet who believed that the 'candidate question' mattered more than the party composition of the government (34 per cent, up from 27 per cent in 2009 and just 19 per cent in 2005), and no less than 68 per cent of the electorate identified Merkel as the main reason for the strong showing of the CDU/CSU (see Helms 2014a, 110). Merkel's elevated status, which also manifested in an unusual all-time high public popularity of the chancellor recorded around mid-term of the Merkel III government, contrasted with the less prominent and more vulnerable role of the chancellor especially in the Merkel I but also in the Merkel II government (see Glaab 2010; Murswieck 2015).

Merkel's third term as chancellor was remarkable, however, in particular in terms of political leadership, as it seemed to witness a curious and sudden transformation of her leadership approach that observers have struggled to make sense of, and which is at the centre of the critical reassessment offered in this article. In order to avoid a mere descriptive account of recent developments, we relate our analysis of Merkel's more recent leadership performance to the debate about 'conviction politics' and 'conviction leadership' that has figured prominently in some of the major Anglo-Saxon democracies, especially during the Reagan and Thatcher eras, but which has older roots in political sociology of the early twentieth century.[2] The next section revisits this complex and contested concept of 'conviction leadership', and its role in the more recent debate over political leadership in the contemporary advanced democracies. Sections three and four then examine Merkel's performance as a political leader with a special focus on the euro and refugee crises, before we eventually put Merkel's case into perspective.

2. REVISITING THE CONVICTION POLITICS/LEADERSHIP CONCEPT

Both in contemporary political journalism and in the political science literature, the terms 'conviction politics/leadership' or 'conviction politician/leader' are firmly tied to the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the US and the premiership Margaret Thatcher in Britain (see, for example, Bell 1985a; Little 1989; Wallison 2004; Holmes 2010). It was Reagan who once famously noted, back in 1964, that 'we must have the courage to

do what we know is morally right', a statement that later on was to become a *leitmotif* of his presidency and no less so of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Both Reagan and Thatcher were self-declared 'conviction politicians', offering strong leadership on the basis of fundamental principles (see Sykes 2000, 4–6). It is important to note, though, that conviction politics is by no means necessarily confined to conservative or neo-liberal agendas or policies. In the older literature, most historical examples given rather related to politicians of the Left (see Bell 1985b, 1).

In British politics, 'conviction politician' has remained a term with overly positive connotations, and has been claimed as a label even by political leaders strikingly different from Thatcher, such as Labour leader and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The passing away of Baroness Thatcher in April 2013 triggered a wealth of reflections on the importance of conviction, or convictions, in politics. While both Thatcher's values and her style have remained deeply contested, even in retrospect, the very term has proven to be rather compelling, if only because it is difficult to conceive of a direct alternative, such as 'lack-of-conviction politics', as Janet Daley (2013) notes.

However, in contrast to what some media commentators suggested, 'conviction politics' actually has been defined in opposition to an alternative conception of politics. This is true first and foremost for the political thinking of German sociologist Max Weber, who famously distinguished between an 'ethic of responsibility' (*Verantwortungsethik*) and 'ethic of ultimate ends' (*Gesinnungsethik*). The latter has also been translated from German as an 'ethic of single-minded conviction', an 'ethic of absolute conviction or pure intention' or an 'ethic of principled conviction' (see Slavnic 2004, 5). According to the conventional interpretation of Weber's two ethics, 'the responsible politician acts in a way that is instrumentally rational given her ends; the conviction politician has a conception of "the right thing to do" that refers not to the consequences of actions, but to inherent value' (O'Donovan 2011, 95). There has been a wide-ranging debate among sociologists and political scientists over to what extent Weber considered this to be two completely distinctive and distinct logics of political decision-making and leadership. Most scholars acknowledge that Weber, while considering responsibility to be the proper creed of the professional politician, concluded that 'the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites' and that the two ethics can in fact be 'complementary' (Weber 1994, 368). Luther's famous declaration, 'here I stand, I can do no other', quoted by Weber at the end of his essay, has been widely considered to epitomise for him the combination of conviction and responsibility required.

Conviction politics or leadership would appear to have a special affinity to James McGregor Burns' famous conception of transforming or transformational leadership, which for Burns marks the noblest form of leadership (Burns 1978). Indeed, Burns is said to have contended that 'leadership is conviction' (see Schudel 2014), though his discussion of Weber remained notably minimalistic. Burns' sympathy for Weber's 'ethic of conviction' can also be captured from his sharp critique of its alternative, which is deemed to permit, even to foster, expedient, opportunistic and highly self-serving action (Burns 1978, 45). Effectively, however, Burns' own concept of transformational or transforming leadership involves elements of both of Weber's 'ethics'. Transforming leaders are considered to exert a form of moral leadership that is driven by conviction and a deep belief in a better future, yet this notwithstanding, 'leaders take responsibility for their commitments' (Burns 1978, 4). As John Kane

has suggested, although Burns does not seem to realise the parallel of Weber's dualistic categorisation with his own distinctions, both Weber's and Burns' ideal types should be interpreted as an extreme end of a spectrum of possibilities of political practice and political leadership, stretching from pragmatism to conviction (Kane 2001, 29–30).

There is another string of research in the wider field of comparative politics worth noting that conceptualises 'conviction politics' as an alternative to 'consensus politics' (see Sykes 2000, ch. 1). In contrast to consensus politicians, who tend to be 'preoccupied with reelection and consequently continue to avoid declaring controversial positions', Patricia Sykes contends that 'conviction generally precedes or excludes strategic calculations about how to achieve and expand power' (2000, 4, 6). However, both conviction and consensus politics are acknowledged to be simplifications.

Summarising the distinctions presented above, conviction leadership can be understood to imply that a leader is motivated by principled beliefs, rather than instrumental self-interest or political strategy, and that, given the deep belief in the righteousness of their viewpoints, is likely to show a particular tenacity in pursuing those beliefs even in the face of protracted controversy and powerful dissent. Empirically establishing whether a political leader exerts conviction leadership, though, remains immensely difficult. This is mainly because beliefs and motivations generating particular patterns of agency cannot be observed directly (which marks a more general methodological challenge of leadership research), and thus convictions have to be inferred from statements and behaviour.

On the basis of this, we suggest four indicators to distinguish conviction leaders from pragmatic leaders for the empirical assessment to follow. Firstly, in contrast to pragmatic leaders, *we expect conviction leaders to adhere to a certain belief system, to be stable in their convictions even when the context changes* (see also Van Esch 2014; Molthof 2016). Secondly, referring to the distinction between interests and beliefs established above, *we expect conviction leaders to adhere to their beliefs even if this is likely to violate their own interests* (including in particular their interest to secure re-election). A third indicator for establishing that a leader is acting out of conviction rather than engaging in consensus politics is *the extent to which a leader's position is shared by other actors from his or her own political peer group, and supported by the wider public* (Molthof 2016); more often than not, conviction leadership is likely to mean 'swimming against the tide'. Finally, as discussed above, conviction leadership, as we understand it, typically involves *an ethical dimension*, a more particular set of beliefs that concerns issues of human nature, humanity and the human condition and a conviction in the righteousness of one's beliefs (Weber 1994; O'Donovan 2011).

Applying any particular concept to a female political actor involuntarily raises the question about the gendered nature of that concept and its possible consequences (see Goertz and Mazur 2010; Waylen et al. 2013). If leadership is widely considered to be an essentially masculine concept, this is certainly the case with 'conviction leadership' (Sykes 2016, 176). That said, some of the actions by the prototypical female conviction leader, Margaret Thatcher, who acted 'masculine' and thus tended to 'feminise' her environment (Sykes 2016, 178), are not inherently related to 'conviction leadership' per se. Aggression and ruthlessness can exist even in the complete absence of strong convictions; by contrast, strong convictions (especially those of an ethical nature) can

well form the backbone of more gentle leadership styles. While we do acknowledge the importance of deconstructing the often hidden gender code of concepts, we believe that, ultimately, the study of political leaders and leadership has most to gain from de-gendering leadership analysis by developing concepts that are conscious of and seek to avoid gender-related stereotypes (see Campus 2013, 115–120). This marks the wider theoretical context from which our basic conceptual parameters and more particular indicators introduced above were derived.

The remainder of this paper seeks to establish if, or to what extent, Angela Merkel's leadership performance during her third term in office can be meaningfully understood as a manifestation of 'conviction leadership'. We do so by performing two case studies – the 'euro crisis' and the 'refugee crisis' – both of which had not just domestic but obvious and far-reaching international dimensions. Moreover, both cases have triggered wide-ranging public and academic debates about the extent to which government policy was actually influenced by the nature and role of the convictions of Chancellor Merkel. Thus, revisiting these cases through the conceptual lens of 'conviction leadership' may reasonably claim to be of major relevance, in terms of both politics and political science.

3. MERKEL'S CONVICTION LEADERSHIP IN THE EURO CRISIS

Reviewing the many accounts of the chancellor's management of the euro crisis during her second term reveals that – like many other European leaders – Merkel was slow to catch up to the urgency of the situation (Van Esch and Swinkels 2016). Moreover, her initial response to the crisis was in line with pure ordoliberal thinking (Van Esch 2014): she regarded Greece's problems as being a result of sluggish fiscal discipline and the resolution of these as a national responsibility. Offering fiscal support would be a violation of the fundaments of European Economic and Monetary Union and would only encourage moral hazard (Paterson 2011; Meiers 2015; Schoeller 2016). However, like Helmut Kohl, it did not take Merkel long to find out that her ordoliberal beliefs were hard to reconcile with a pro-European stance (Van Esch 2012; Bulmer and Paterson 2013). Once she realised Greece's fiscal problems posed a threat to the Eurozone and thereby the EU as a whole, Merkel changed position and agreed to provide fiscal support[3] to Greece (Schild 2013; Galpin 2017, 85–89). True to her ordoliberal beliefs, however, she demanded a strict programme of reforms and fiscal consolidation in return (Meiers 2015; Molthof 2016). Throughout the rest of her crisis-ridden second term, this precarious balancing act between safeguarding the Eurozone while upholding its character as a *Stabilitätsunion* guided all her actions: The chancellor supported further institutionalised fiscal support via the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), but imposed strict conditions, demanded the involvement of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to assure compliance and pursued stronger constitutionalised fiscal discipline via the reinforcement of stability and growth pact (SGP) and the Fiscal Compact. She explicitly backed the announcement of the European Central Bank (ECBs) outright monetary transactions programme as a measure of last resort to save the Eurozone, but blocked any mutualisation of debt or risk via Eurobonds or a European fiscal backstop for banks.

There has been much discussion about the extent to which Merkel's decisions during her first term were informed by national or electoral interests, the exposure of

German banks to Greek bonds and the costs of a Greek default or debt relief for German taxpayers (Meiers 2015; Thompson 2015; Molthof 2016, 141, 146; Schoeller 2016; Varoufakis 2017). There has been even more discussion about the strength of Merkel's European vocation (Paterson 2011; Molthof 2016, 133; cf. Galpin 2017, ch. 7). Opinions vary widely on these questions, but few would argue that Merkel's actions during her first term fit those of a conviction leader. Reviewing her management of the euro crisis during her third term may, however, lead to a different conclusion.

Despite the fact that the problems underlying the euro crisis had remained unresolved and many member states were still experiencing economic difficulties, at the beginning of Merkel's third term the situation in the Eurozone had stabilised. Draghi's intervention in the summer of 2012 had calmed the markets and the situation in Ireland, Spain and Portugal had improved to the extent that they were about to exit the bail-out programme. Moreover, over the years the German banks had limited their exposure to Greece. So, although the sovereign debt problems in Greece had actually worsened since the start of the crisis and it still experienced a negative economic growth rate, the problems appeared to be contained and fear of a possible break-up of the Eurozone was subsiding. At home, the new coalition with the SPD was not expected to give rise to a significant change in the management of the euro crisis, although the rise of the Eurosceptic party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) did limit Merkel's room for manoeuvre.

The problems the chancellor faced thus seemed manageable. Over the course of 2014, it became clear that due to sluggish economic performance France would not be able to meet the norm of 3 per cent deficit. Moreover, facing similar problems, Matteo Renzi, the new prime minister of Italy, used Italy's six-month presidency of the Council of Ministers to push for more flexibility in the European budgetary norms and advocate an increase in government investments (Meiers 2015). To Merkel's dismay, the French successfully lobbied the European Commission to extend the deadline to implement structural reforms and lower its deficit to 2017. Merkel spoke out against the decision and pressed France to make additional reforms. However, in the end, Minister of Finance Schäuble grudgingly supported a two-year waiver for France (Blome 2014; Meiers 2015, 63–73). The Merkel government, however, did manage to thwart plans to use the ESM for investments and held on to the national goal of reaching zero deficit in 2015 and the 60 per cent norm by 2020.

More problematic for Merkel were the actions of the ECB. Over the course of 2014, the sluggish growth, low inflation and private investment in the Eurozone induced the ECB to lower interest rates and engage in a new bond-buying scheme. In contrast to 2012, this time Merkel did not support the measures (Spiegel 2014). As she felt that at this time the survival of Economic and Monetary Union was not at stake, the chancellor saw the measures as a blatant example of quantitative easing. Like many others in Germany, Merkel feared that the low rates and bond-buying programme could tempt other member states to give up on the necessary reforms and fiscal consolidation (Meiers 2015, 76–77; Jones, Wagstyl, and Giles 2015).[4] German resistance persuaded the ECB to adjust the details of the programme, but Merkel could not prevent the new programme from being implemented. All of these early developments, however, were to prove just minor hiccups in comparison to the revival of the Greek crisis that would push the chancellor to show her true colours.

The upheaval of the Greek crisis started with the election of anti-austerity party Syriza into government in January 2015. Immediately after the election, Prime Minister Tsipras and Minister of Finance Varoufakis started to make good on their election promises and reversed some of the crisis measures demanded by the bail-out programme. In addition, they initiated renegotiations on the conditions of the next tranche of loans scheduled for February 2015 (Van Esch 2017).

These actions were not received favourably in Germany and reignited discussion about the pros and cons of a (voluntary) 'Grexit'. Merkel made clear that she wanted Greece to remain in the Eurozone, but at the same time she was equally adamant about the need for the Greeks to reform and put their public finances in order (Meiers 2015, 91–92; Wagstyl 2015). On 20 February 2015, an agreement was reached that extended the bail-out programme for four months with hardly any changes in the original conditions. Three days later, the Bundestag voted in favour of the deal. However, a large number of CDU/CSU parliamentarians dissented and voted against it (Meiers 2015, 94–95).

As Greece was still at risk of default, new EU negotiations on the next trances of the support package followed. Months of erratic bargaining caused a serious deterioration of relations between Greek and other Eurozone leaders (Varoufakis 2017). During these negotiations, Merkel showed a dogged determination to solve the disagreements. In contrast to her finance minister, who increasingly supported a Greek exit, Merkel wanted to keep Greece in the Eurozone, but would not back down on her demand that the IMF remain part of the deal. As the weeks went by, Merkel increasingly took the lead in solving the dispute, holding bilateral talks with Tsipras and organising an emergency meeting with key EU leaders and the director of IMF (Spiegel, Barker, and Wagstyl 2015). At the same time, she kept insisting that Greece comply with the conditions of the bail-out package and refused to discuss debt relief, although she did consent to setting a slower pace for the required deficit reductions (Meiers 2015, 101; Muller 2015).

In the end, however, Merkel's efforts did not mark a full breakthrough. On 26 June 2015, Tsipras walked out on the negotiations, declaring the final proposal to be 'humiliating' (Traynor 2015); he called a referendum on, and campaigned for a rejection of the deal. On 5 July, 61 per cent of the Greek people voted 'no' in the referendum. In the meantime, the dire financial situation had forced the Greek government to impose capital controls and default on a payment to the IMF. This effectively brought an end to the second bail-out package. With the government due to pay another €6.6 billion to the European Central Bank and the Greek banks running out of money, Tsipras suddenly made a complete U-turn, struck a deal with three pro-EU parties in the Greek parliament and returned to Brussels to start negotiations on a third bail-out package (Foy and Hope 2015; Traynor 2015). On 11 July 2015, the European partners were back at the table.

After two days of gruelling negotiations that have been described by observers as the 'mental waterboarding' of the Greeks, a deal was finally struck (Traynor 2015). Accounts of the events tell a grim story of a Eurozone that came to the brink of disintegration, starting with German Minister of Finance Schäuble putting a policy proposal regarding a temporary Greek exit on the table. Unconvinced of the wisdom of the plans of her minister, spurred on by several hawkish colleagues like the Dutch Prime Minister

Mark Rutte and backed by the leaders of the other programme states, Merkel tightened the thumbscrews. On the second day, after 14 hours of non-stop talks, with neither Tsipras nor Merkel prepared to make further compromises, they were ready to give up and plunge the Eurozone into the unknown. Only through a last-minute intervention by Council President Tusk – 'sorry, but there is no way you are leaving this room' – and mediation by French President Hollande, were the last sticking point on the size and purpose of a privatisation fund solved and a deal on the third Greek bail-out struck (Chassany, Barker, and Robinson 2015). The possibility of a temporary Greek exit from the Eurozone was removed from the text, but the conditions for this package were even more stringent than those of the second bail-out the Greeks had rejected. Merkel had decided to save the euro but demanded a high price for it.

Immediately after the story of the events broke, the chancellor was vilified by the international press for her harsh and uncompromising stance and for disregarding the democratic 'no' of the Greek people. Domestically, however, most of the German public supported her tough stance and the deal was ratified in the Bundestag by 439 to 119 votes. However, a record 60 CDU/CSU MPs voted against the deal (Meiers 2015). During the remainder of Merkel's third term the euro crisis slowly became less politicised and, with the outbreak of the refugee crisis and the Brexit vote, moved down the political agenda.

This account of Merkel's management of the euro crisis shows that throughout her third term the chancellor tried to maintain the balance between her ordoliberal convictions and desire to keep the Eurozone intact. She stuck to her beliefs despite the fact that both convictions proved controversial and significant sections of her international and domestic peers and constituents doubted whether this was the best way to solve the crisis. The case thereby ticks the first indicator of conviction leadership suggested above. The July 2015 crisis also shows that when the crunch came, Merkel put her European vocation first. Although in her eyes this may have been the best choice for Germany in the long term, self-interest cannot convincingly explain this decision, thus ticking the second indicator of conviction leadership. In particular, factors that suggested self-interest was at play with regard to the first bail-out of Greece – such as the exposure of German banks and the risk of contagion – were no longer a concern in July 2015 (Thompson 2015; Molthof 2016, 185). Like most top German politicians, Merkel was convinced the Eurozone could withstand a Greek exit (Molthof 2016, 172). In addition, the polls indicated that a majority of the German public was against the third bail-out package and – like many in the CDU and CSU – favoured Schäuble's tough position (Molthof 2016, 172, 183). So, in line with the third indicator, Merkel's decision to agree to the third support package against the wishes of the Germany public and many party members provides evidence for a genuine commitment to the euro (Molthof 2016). Given the ordoliberal convictions of the German public and Merkel's own economic beliefs, her efforts to make the third bail-out conditional on an even more stringent package of reforms does not detract from that conclusion. Finally, the only element that remains elusive in the case of Merkel's management of the euro crisis is the ethical dimension of conviction leadership. Given the strong moral objections that have been raised against her actions and its effects on the Greek economy and welfare of its people, it may be hard to see how her position could be considered just (Panagiotarea 2013; Meiers

2015, 3). However, such external criticism does not preclude Merkel herself firmly believing in the righteousness of her convictions. In fact, her persistence in light of her many critics indicates that the chancellor was convinced of the justness of her actions, or, as she has put it herself, that 'what is good for Germany is good for Europe' (Merkel cited in Meiers 2015, 127; cf. Galpin 2017, 89–91).

All in all, a review of her behaviour and decisions during her third term warrants the conclusion that Merkel has acted on a European vocation that slowly intensified over the years. Her tenacity in trying to keep the Eurozone together in the face of Greek defiance, an unwilling constituency and dissenting party members, as well as the ultimate decision to support a third bail-out, tick the criteria for conviction leadership formulated at the start of the paper. In contrast to many others in the German elite, however, Merkel's European vocation comes in intergovernmental rather than supranational colours. This may be a deviation in the German context but from Merkel's perspective there were good reasons not to strive for supranational European euro-crisis management. From her dual ordoliberal–European perspective, the more expansive course of the ECB, the leniency of the European Commission in upholding the SGP criteria, the Karlsruhe ruling on the involvement of the German Bundestag as well as the opposition of certain member states against the ESM and Fiscal Compact all necessitated reverting to intergovernmental arrangements. More importantly, however, advocating more intergovernmental solutions does not detract from the fact that, during the euro crisis, Merkel evinced true European convictions.

4. MERKEL'S CONVICTION LEADERSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Beginning in 2013, refugees from the Syrian war, from imploding Iraq and from war-weary Afghanistan began to pour into Europe, seeking asylum. In the first half of 2015, 450,000 refugees had poured into Germany, and it was straining to find accommodation for them. In July, Chancellor Merkel told a disabled Palestinian girl, whose family was awaiting a decision on their asylum application, 'you know in the refugee camps in Lebanon are thousands and thousands and if we were to say you can all come … we just can't manage it'.[5]

But the dramatic events to come would soon bring out her deeper convictions on refugees and issues of migration. On 25 August, the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF) declared that Germany would favourably consider asylum claims from all Syrian refugees, and six days later the first trains bursting with asylum seekers arrived in Munich from Hungary. Images of refugees began to fill the front pages of the media. On 26 August, they showed Merkel visiting a refugee shelter in Saxony, with angry crowds pressing her car shouting obscene insults, some calling her a traitor for allowing Muslims into the country. On 27 August, a truck with 71 dead refugees was found on a highway in Austria, and three days later three-year-old Alain Kurdi's little body was photographed on a Turkish beach. He and most of his family had drowned in an attempt to flee Syria and seek refuge in Greece. The photo went viral. The next day Merkel declared her famous mantra, 'we will manage', and stated that by keeping its doors open 'Germany is doing what is morally and legally required of it. Nothing more, nothing less'.[6]

Merkel had no intention of managing alone. Almost immediately, she enlisted the European Union in her effort to 'manage'. *Der Spiegel* opined, 'Merkel's invitation to refugees … wasn't just in Germany's name. She was speaking for all of Europe' (Spiegel Online 2015). Speaking to the German parliament on 9 September, she stated: 'If we show courage and lead the way, a common European approach is more likely … If Europe fails on the refugee issue, we would lose one of the key reasons for founding a united Europe, namely universal human rights' (Goebel 2015). In the wake of this speech, the international press hailed her as a '*moral leader*' (Meiritz 2015), Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* shouted 'bravo',[7] and the Israeli press called her 'noble'.[8]

Hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers now flooded through open borders into Germany, and on 13 September Merkel decided that Germany's border with Austria would remain open despite the strain on Germany's asylum infrastructure. Perhaps remembering the hateful reception on her visit to the refugee shelter, Merkel justified her decision by saying that 'If we start to apologize for welcoming these desperate people, then this is no longer my country. It is the country of the mob'.

Why did Angela Merkel fling open Germany's doors to refugees and work to forge a common European asylum policy? Why did she continue to do so in the face of widespread opposition when it appeared to jeopardise her political interests? Did the decision result from a series of blunders and communication failures (Alexander 2017)? Or was this truly an instance of Merkel's conviction leadership, a deep desire to strengthen Europe, a strong belief in Europe's principles as a guide to decisions in a humanitarian emergency, and a deep commitment to Christian principles, embedded in her psyche since childhood and nurtured by her experience growing up in a Protestant minister's family behind the Iron Curtain (Resing 2009; Reuth and Lachmann 2013)?

Three decisions formed Merkel's response to the European refugee crisis. The first was her announcement that Germany would take in almost a million refugees and pave the way for refugee integration into the labour force. Second, she suspended enforcement of the EU's Dublin Agreement which stipulates that refugees must register in the first EU country they enter. Merkel's suspension of that agreement meant that they could now come directly to Germany and register there, thus lowering the hurdle for Syrians to enter the EU. Germany's European partners saw this suspension as helpful (Hungary was so overburdened with applications that it would not allow applicants back in if they left), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was relieved, claiming that the regulation abused the refugees' rights (Fratzke 2015). Germany's suspension of the agreement eased that burden for both refugees and for the 'frontline states', and the European Commission hailed it as an act of European solidarity. A third decision expanded an interpretation of the German constitution to provide refuge to those fleeing war rather than simply those fleeing persecution, as required by the 1951 Refugee Convention. In tandem with this expansive reinterpretation of the constitution, Merkel refused to set an upper limit on the number of refugees Germany would accept.[9]

Initially, the majority of Germany's population was solidly behind Merkel's three decisions. An astounding 88 per cent of the German population donated funding, clothes, toys, food and their own volunteer efforts to the incoming Syrians. Auguring well for the embrace of refugees was Germany's labour shortage and a desperate

need for immigrants to contribute to the growing bill for pensions and health care. Merkel met with industry leaders to discuss labour regulation reforms that would bring refugees quickly into the labour force. Siemens established an internship programme for refugees, and several other firms followed suit. Capturing the mood of German industry, the Chief Executive Officer of Daimler announced: 'Most refugees are young, well-educated and highly motivated – just the sort of people we are looking for' (quoted in McGregor 2015).

Merkel also wanted her fellow EU member states to share the burden of refugee resettlement. The tasks of resettlement and deportation had been left to member states, and the only goal of the EU's 'migration management' was to *prevent* migrants from irregular entry into the EU. As growing numbers of refugees flooded into Europe through porous borders, Merkel called for a common asylum policy. She had long encouraged such a policy, but it lay dormant, and she intended to resurrect it. The EU, she believed, could ease the crisis by distributing refugees among member states. If successful, this would be the first time that the EU had exercised authority over refugee relocation and resettlement, removing that authority from its members.

Angela Merkel fully intended for Germany to lead this burden-sharing effort. She also wanted the quota system to be mandatory, to awaken her fellow member states to the humanitarian emergency. Suggesting that she saw herself as a moral leader of Europe, she stated that 'without clear guidance, Europe will probably fail to find a way through this historic crisis'. She explained that a mandatory quota system for all was necessary because it would not be possible to simply set a limit and then leave it up to a few members to take in all of the refugees. 'This must be a European responsibility, and only then will all member states care about the causes of migration.'[10]

Merkel's first step in this effort was to use financial incentives to bring her partners on board. The proposal would redistribute 160,000 refugees throughout member states through a mandatory quota system over two years and allocate €780 million to members to fund resettlement. The EU commission also agreed to reinforce the EU's external borders. Merkel had already taken measures at home to reduce the refugee flow. The speed and scale of the refugee influx had strained almost to breaking point Germany's ability to process applications and care for asylum seekers. She introduced temporary checks on Germany's border with Austria, triggering similar moves in Slovakia and Austria. EU interior ministers – including de Maizière – moved to suspend the Schengen agreement for up to two years so that members could introduce border controls. Germany reinstated the Dublin agreement (Teitelbaum 2015). The 'we will manage' mantra now included managing the stream of refugees into Germany and Europe as well as managing the acceptance and integration of refugees at home.

But opposition to the resettlement plan mounted, and she knew that it would fail in the Council, where a unanimous decision was required. Therefore, debate was moved to a meeting of interior ministers, in which qualified majority voting was the rule.[11] To gain that majority, she would need the bigger states – France, Spain and Italy – on board, and she managed to persuade all three (Kellner 2015). Germany, she argued, would bear the bulk of the refugee burden: while she refused to set upper acceptance limits, others were permitted to do so. Some members of the Visegrad Group still balked. Now, Merkel issued an implicit threat: 'What isn't acceptable in my view is

that some people are saying this has nothing to do with them. This won't work in the long run. There will be consequences.'[12] As the largest contributor to the EU budget, would Germany use its generous funding as a stick to punish those who did not cooperate? Merkel stopped short of this coercive move, but damage to the plan had been done. Although incentives and arm-twisting convinced a majority to grudgingly accept the resettlement plan for two years, a majority of EU members rejected a proposal for 'compulsory and permanent' EU quotas. Furthermore, after the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015, opposition to the two-year plan was bolder and more widespread. By December 2017, the quotas had not been met.[13]

Clearly, the forced majority vote damaged European solidarity, which had already been weakened by Merkel's response to the Greek debt crisis. She held to her principles in the face of opposition but stumbled when she issued an implicit threat to her fellow EU partners. A conflict between her two principles – the primacy of humanitarianism and a commitment to European solidarity – had shown its face. Merkel, however, did not retreat. Her next step was to bypass the EU dissenters and create a 'coalition of the willing' to *voluntarily* resettle refugees in Europe. She brought together the leaders of Sweden, Finland, Austria, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium and Greece to support a voluntary plan for resettlement of refugees from Turkey to Europe. The plan, presented by the EU Commission,[14] would create 'legal migration' from Turkey to the EU and be accompanied by a transfer of EU funds to Turkey in exchange for its promise to secure its borders.

Mandatory resettlement would eventually founder, but Europe's borders would be strengthened. Merkel's aim now was to ensure that as few refugees as possible embarked on the journey to Europe and that those denied asylum – e.g. Afghans, Libyans and Somalis fleeing violent death – could be repatriated to 'safe' third countries like Turkey. Her talks with Erdogan paved the way for an agreement that emerged in November. The EU Commission agreed to provide Turkey with financial aid to hasten the resettlement of refugees in Turkey, tighten Turkey's borders and accept refugees who were to be deported from Greece. The EU would also loosen visa restrictions on Turks travelling to Europe and would speed up negotiations on Turkey's bid to join the EU. In June 2016, EU members agreed to a German plan to expand European border and coast control to reinforce the EU's common external borders and conduct search and rescue missions. Both the agreement with Turkey and expanded border control and rescue capabilities led to an almost immediate reduction in the number of migrants entering Europe.

At home, however, Merkel's refusal to accept an upper limit on Syrian refugees had unleashed hostility. As the summer of 2015 turned into autumn, 10,000 asylum seekers a day had arrived in Germany and political opposition to Merkel's open door policy began to brew. The anti-euro party AfD, which had been sliding in the polls since the easing of the euro crisis, quickly switched focus to immigration and began to attract supporters. Merkel's chief opponent, Horst Seehofer of the CSU, pledged to stop the migrants from coming, threatening to sue the federal government. Merkel's popularity began to wane, both in terms of recorded personal job approval ratings and the electoral performance of her party at state level.[15] It appeared that her principles were undermining her domestic authority and thus her political interests.

Germany would soon lose its status as a country safe from terror attacks. On 31 December 2015, hundreds of men 'with an immigration background' harassed and robbed women as they passed by Cologne train station. And in the following summer four attacks in multiple German cities killed 10 people; three were committed by men who had entered the country as asylum seekers. The Berlin Christmas market attack on 19 December 2016 left 12 people dead and 56 wounded. The attacker was a deported immigrant who had slipped through the cracks. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria had quickly claimed responsibility. Merkel's popularity dropped to 31.5 per cent in the polls.

Merkel immediately moved to restrict asylum in Germany. She made it easier to deport immigrant offenders. Although she still refused to set limits on the number of asylum seekers that Germany would accept, the government had begun to restrict the list of countries whose nationals could apply for asylum. Subsequent decisions and laws discouraged asylum seekers at every stage of the application process. Deportations were expedited and family reunions delayed in an attempt to manage the crisis at the administrative level and in the face of domestic political opposition. By March 2017, the reduced inflow of refugees, a tightened refugee policy and the beginning of an efficient and increasingly effective integration process for asylum seekers took the 'refugee crisis' off the streets and out of the news cycle, and Merkel's approval rating again hovered above 60 per cent.[16] The German political structure, the political support of the Greens and the SPD, the wave of grassroots refugee aid groups that have sprung up to help, and Merkel's reserve of popularity all suggest that she was politically able to hold to her humanitarian convictions while taking practical measures to manage the refugee flow.

As the EU resettlement plan was put on life support, Merkel refused to give up on the task of solving the refugee crisis. Her humanitarian principles and practical instincts led her seek European solutions outside Europe's borders and ultimately try to weaken its root cause of refugee flight by strengthening EU neighbourhood policy. The Balkans, Libya, Sudan and Egypt remained unstable, and Ukraine, Syria and Yemen were at war. Refugee camps in Africa were overflowing and starved for funds. To address these crises, Merkel again led Europe by humanitarian example, sending food and medical packets to help stabilise conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jorden. German development policy was also refocused to create 'safe areas' in Africa and the Middle East, where refugees can be repatriated. Development funds would be used as leverage to persuade these countries to agree to repatriate both their own nationals and those who transited through them. In March 2017, Merkel travelled to Egypt, seeking cooperation to stem the flow of refugees to Libya, and to Tunisia, seeking the acceptance of deported Tunisian asylum seekers. She made African economic development and more effective border control with Eritrea priorities for Germany's G20 presidency (see Benner 2017). Then, following the model of the EU's agreement with Turkey, she promoted 'burden sharing' among EU members, to offer aid in exchange for promises to control refugee flows from Jordan, Lebanon, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Ethiopia, Tunisia and Libya.[17]

In sum, with regard to the refugee crisis, Merkel did evince 'conviction leadership' in terms of the four indicators outlined above. In line with the first indicator, once she realised the humanitarian consequences of the refugee crisis, Merkel persisted in her

belief that Germany should help the refugees. Guided by the 'ethics of conviction' that in a humanitarian emergency in Europe one should help the people in need, she accepted the most refugees of all EU members with no upper limit on the number of refugees.[18] Secondly, her adherence to her convictions was not informed by self-interest, thereby ticking the second indictor. Individually she had nothing to gain from taking and maintaining this controversial stance, in fact, Merkel put at risk her political interests (including being considered an exceptionally popular leader with a good chance of being re-elected). The case is also in line with our third indicator, since the chancellor adhered to her convictions even when she came to face fierce opposition from many of her EU partners and, hardly less seriously, from within her own party and the CSU. Moreover, her position was controversial in the view of large parts of the German public. Finally, and in contrast to the case of the Eurozone crisis, the analysis above leaves little doubt that Merkel's position on the refugee crisis had a marked ethical component. Throughout the crisis, Merkel voiced and showed strong signs of a pragmatic 'ethics of responsibility'. Her actions were clearly guided by the firm belief in the righteousness of upholding European solidarity, and in defending more universal values of humanity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As our case studies suggest, Merkel's third term witnessed spells of what could meaningfully be referred to as 'conviction leadership', although the extent to which the different indicators were met differs. In the case of the refugee crisis, it took the chancellor some time to fully realise the dire humanitarian consequences of the situation. However, as with the euro crisis, as soon as she established her position she stuck to it unwaveringly. In both the euro and refugee crises, Merkel's convictions did not derive from any form of self-interest, and in both cases the position of the chancellor was highly controversial in the eyes of the voters, her political peers and many of her European partners. Finally, her position in the refugee crisis was marked by a strong ethical dimension, which was less pronounced in the case of the Eurozone crisis. All in all, however, both cases tick most (or all) indicators, and provide substantive evidence that during her third term Merkel indeed showed characteristics of conviction leadership. Moreover, while both episodes were triggered by major political crises, this does not diminish Merkel's performance as a leader driven by genuine conviction, all the more so as her activities were clearly proactive rather than reactive. If viewed in the context of the track record of other 'conviction leaders', Merkel's leadership performance on these occasions demonstrates that there are notable varieties of (notions of) 'conviction leadership'. Overall, the strong moral dimension of Merkel's leadership, especially in the refugee crisis, is no doubt much more in line with Max Weber's or James MacGregor Burns' ideas about conviction than with Margaret Thatcher's deeply ideological and aggressive brand of conviction politics and leadership.

While our case studies essentially focused on the events between 2015 and early 2017, the September 2017 Bundestag election, and its aftermath, provided further evidence supporting our assessments. To the extent that the substance of a leader's conviction on a particular issue can be measured by the electoral costs that sticking to one's guns may possibly incur (see above), the very significant losses of the CDU/CSU at

the Bundestag election (minus 8.6 percentage points), would seem to support an assessment of Merkel as a conviction-based leader not shying away from potential electoral confrontations. Remarkably, on the evening of her party's bitter defeat Merkel did not hesitate to assert, 'I can't see what we would have to do differently now'.[19] And, very much in line with this, her longstanding refusal to accept an 'upper limit' on the number of refugees was upheld until beyond the election.[20]

All this having been said, taking into account the three full terms of her chancellorship, Angela Merkel is likely to be remembered by many as a pragmatic leader. Her performance in the euro crisis and the refugee crisis did not mark a fundamental 'reinvention', or transformation, of her leadership approach, but a distinct and distinctive component of, and addition to, her wider record as a German and European political leader. Thus, what we identified in our case studies could be labelled as issue-specific or sectoral conviction leadership. In this, Merkel does not stand alone. Despite their very different styles, for example, both Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder came to a point late in their respective terms where they would set their hearts on a particular issue (Blair with the UK's participation in the war against Iraq, Schröder with 'Agenda 2020') and went out of their way to see things through, ignoring looming political defeat, thereby shattering their established reputations as pragmatic, even populist, political leaders.

These cases suggest that some politicians may have a 'conviction gene' that is activated under certain circumstances. Interestingly, a wider assessment of Angela Merkel's political career reveals that there have been earlier episodes of apparently conviction-based decision-making that have been buried under the dominant perceptions of her long-standing pragmatist leadership as chancellor. Indeed, her political track record as opposition leader (2000–2005; see Clemens 2006) included several tough and apparently conviction-based decisions, such as her backing of Bush's Iraq war (against almost the entire German body politic), which, in retrospect, could be identified as an early manifestation of Merkel's hidden potential as a conviction leader.

Uncovering the complex dynamics that leads pragmatic leaders to step out of their own shadows when they feel the time has come to do so marks a challenge that psychology and anthropology would seem to be considerably better equipped to master than comparative politics. If there is one basic, yet crucially important, political lesson to be learned from the inquiry above, it certainly must be that, even in the most complex and dispersed leadership environments, such as the Federal Republic of Germany or the European Union, leaders and their convictions can and do make a difference.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the anonymous referees of this journal for their most insightful comments and suggestions. The usual disclaimer applies.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

FUNDING

The open access publication of this article has been made possible by the generous support of the University of Innsbruck.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Spiegel Online, 15 Nov. 2009, http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/triumph-des-pragmatismus-wie-merkel-ihre-macht-absichert-a-661175.html; Zeit Online, 17 Sept. 2017, http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2017-09/angela-merkel-politik-pragmatismus-fluechtlingspolitik
2. As set out in more detail below, our understanding of leadership, and 'conviction leadership' more specifically, is tied to agency-centred notions of leadership. To us, manifestations of leadership are essentially driven by what leaders do, bringing to bear their different skills and styles. This is not to say that context – including both structures and other actors – do not matter a lot. Indeed, all leaders operate, and all leadership evolves, in context (see Bell, Hargrove, and Theakston 1999; Hargrove and Owens 2003). In particular institutions have been shown to have a strong explanatory power for different manifestations and patterns of leadership (see Helms 2014b), yet context includes many other aspects to be accounted for, such as the cultural parameters of a given regime, different types of time, and a wealth of situational factors ('t Hart 2014a, 2014b, ch. 5). Context shapes leaders' perceptions, choices and their overall room for manoeuvre as well as the effects that leaders and leadership may have in a particular setting. In turn, leaders may shape the contexts in which they operate – an acknowledgment which is at the heart of the 'interactionist paradigm' of leadership (see Elgie 2015, ch. 1) which our research is closely related to. Thus, our emphasis on the importance of agency, and the difference that leaders may make, is less in opposition to contextual approaches, and rather distinguishes our understanding of leadership from 'leader-free' notions of leadership (see e.g. Raelin 2016).
3. The word fiscal support may be deceptive, as all fiscal support measures consisted of loans to be paid back with interest. They thus increased Greece's already substantial debt.

4. In 2016, the ECB again introduced new non-standard measures that Merkel opposed for similar reasons.
5. See https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-07-16/merkel-sobbing-teenage-refugee-facing-deportation-politics-hard
6. See http://www.dw.com/en/chancellor-angela-merkel-defends-germanys-refugee-policy-as-moral-and-legal/a-18692184.
7. 'Compassion for Refugees Isn't Enough', *International New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2015
8. Quoted in 'Mother Angela: Merkel's Refugee Policy Divides Europe', *Spiegel Online International*, 21 Sept. 2015.
9. See http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/merkel-grundrecht-auf-asyl-kennt-keine-obergrenze-13797029.html
10. 'Zahl der Migranten: Merkel: Grundrecht auf Asyl kennt keine Obergrenze', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 Sept. 2015, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/merkel-grundrecht-auf-asyl-kennt-keine-obergrenze-13797029.html
11. European Commission Statement following the decision at the Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council to relocate 120,000 refugees, Brussels, 22 Sept. 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-15-5697_en.htm
12. Quoted in 'Berlin Calls for Sanctions on EU States that Reject Refugee Quotas', *Deutsche Welle*, 15 Sept. 2015, http://www.dw.com/en/berlin-calls-for-sanctions-on-eu-states-that-reject-refugee-quotas/a-18714957
13. As of Aug. 2017, 44,284 refugees had been distributed throughout Europe. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf
14. 'Commission Presents Recommendation for a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme with Turkey for Refugees from Syria', Strasbourg, 15 Dec. 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6330_en.htm
15. https://bundestagswahl-2017.com/angela-merkel. All four electoral races in four state elections held in 2016 saw the AfD gaining double-digit percentages of the votes and corresponding seats in state parliaments. Considered to be the most devastating blow to Merkel, the CDU came in third behind the Social Democrats and the AfD in her home state of Mecklenburg-West Pomeraina on 4 Sept. 2016.
16. See http://www.dw.com/en/chancellor-merkels-approval-rating-rises-in-polls-as-parties-stay-close/a-37882442
17. On the various agreements implemented see: European Commission, 'Towards a new Partnership Framework with Third Countries under the European Agenda on Migration', Fact Sheet, Strasbourg, 7 June 2016.
18. In December 2017 it emerged that in the first half of 2017 Germany had processed a greater number of applications for asylum that all other EU member states combined; see http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/halbjahresbilanz-357-625-asyl-entscheidungen-in-deutschland-199-405-in-der-restlichen-eu/20665604.html
19. See http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/merkel-nach-der-wahl-die-unerschuetterliche-15219557.html
20. Indeed, the hard-won agreement between CDU and CSU of early October 2017 did not establish a strict upper limit, but rather a target cap (of 200,000 people a year). Also, the number is not binding and asylum seekers will not be turned away at the German border. See https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/union-obergrenze-107.html

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