



In German election, Green party surge creates hope for constitutional carbon target

GermanZero among non-partisan climate groups that would benefit from Annalena Baerbock victory in September

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Editor's note: This column is being published today exclusively for subscribers first.

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (Callaway Climate Insights) — After more than 15 years of leadership by **Angela Merkel**, Germany will be choosing a new chancellor in September and for the first time the environmental Greens party is in position to head the government.

Nobody is more excited than **Jochen Wermuth**, a well-heeled financial manager who is backing an initiative to embed a 2035 target for carbon neutrality into the German

constitution. A nonpartisan group called GermanZero is seeking an amendment of the Basic Law to keep national and regional politicians from prevaricating or backsliding.

“Our goal is to work across party platforms,” says Wermuth, “What happens in Germany is important for all of Europe.”

And something needs to happen in Germany. Europe’s biggest economy has ambitions to be a leader in fighting climate change, but it was only the Covid pandemic that enabled Germany to meet its 2020 emissions target and the country still mining brown coal to fire power plants.

Germany, with the surging Greens and activist groups like GermanZero, is now creating a momentum that captures the zeitgeist of our era to fight climate change and find more sustainable ways of living.

“We need a change of power,” says Wermuth. “The goal is to push for a competent government.”

The end of Merkel’s long tenure has not been marked by the competence and efficiency one usually attributes to Germany. The rollout of the Covid vaccine, for instance, has been botched, as Germany — like many other European Union countries — lags Britain and the United States in the pace of vaccination.

GermanZero was founded in August 2019 and has developed a growing network of committed backers like Wermuth to work toward its goals. It joins an array of other nonprofits and federations in Germany campaigning to fight climate change.

The effort got a big boost last week when the Greens nominated 40-year-old **Annalena Baerbock**, a co-leader of the party and a member of parliament, as its first-ever candidate for chancellor.

The Greens have a shot at unseating Merkel’s center-right Christian Democrats as the dominant political party in the government. They have surged in opinion polls as Merkel’s party has dropped precipitously, upending the political dynamic in Germany.

An April 20 poll shows the Greens commanding 28% support as Christian Democrats drop to 21% percent, reversing their positions from the previous week. Pollsters say Baerbock’s nomination is propelling the Greens forward even as Christian Democrats’ designation of old-school party chairman **Armin Laschet** for chancellor candidate is depressing their support.

The Christian Democrats have been riven by charges of corruption, forcing several lawmakers to resign for bribery and kickbacks in everything from shilling for Azerbaijan to facilitating government procurement contracts for sanitary mask makers.

Under Baerbock and co-leader **Robert Habeck**, the Greens have moved to the center of the political spectrum and developed a full-fledged party platform built around environmental and other social issues.

“They have a chance to get a majority,” says Wermuth. “The biggest voting group in Germany is the nonvoter — 30% of the people don’t vote.”

Getting those voters out could give the Greens a parliamentary majority, or at least make them the leading party, able to designate the chancellor and set the government agenda with a coalition partner.

The Greens and GermanZero are on the same page for working across party lines to reduce emissions in accord with the Paris climate agreement.

GermanZero is also lobbying for a carbon tax to incentivize industry and consumers to reduce emissions more rapidly, using innovative technologies. The tax revenue can be used to ease the transition in transport, power, and agriculture. Society will change its mobility behavior, its energy consumption, and consumption in general, the group believes.

To bring a country that currently relies on oil, gas, and coal for four-fifths of its energy needs to rely solely on renewable sources will require an emphasis on energy efficiency as well as new technologies for production and storage of renewable energy.

Germany can import renewable energy from all over Europe, whether from hydroelectric storage power stations in Scandinavia or solar farms in southern Europe, and serve as an engine for developing these resources throughout the continent.

Political donations are not as commonplace in Germany as in the U.S. but GermanZero hopes to cast a wide net outside the country for aid in transforming Europe's biggest economy. "The Greens cannot solicit funds outside Germany," notes Wermuth, "but GermanZero can as a cross-party platform."

As the cases of bribery and kickbacks demonstrate, Germany's mainstream parties have not had to rely on donations. In seeking widespread support for its sustainability goals, GermanZero is trying to change a political culture marked by increasing corruption.

If the polls are right and the momentum holds, that is about to change.

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