



Why Christian Democracy succeeded in West Germany but failed in France: The politics of pragmatism and its lasting implications for contemporary Europe

European View
1–9© The Author(s) 2026
DOI: 10.1177/17816858261477418
journals.sagepub.com/home/euvJohanna Elisabeth Kosak¹ 

Abstract

Why did Christian Democracy become the dominant force in post-war West Germany yet fail to achieve institutional durability in post-war France? This article argues that these contrasting trajectories were shaped by the unequal pressures of post-war state-building, which enabled pragmatic coalition-building in Bonn while amplifying fragmentation in Paris. Drawing on a comparative analysis of post-war West Germany and post-war France, it traces three mechanisms. The first is the conversion of confessional divides into a cross-denominational *Union* in Germany versus the persistent association of Christian Democracy with Catholicism under French *laïcité*. The second is the moral reconstruction after National Socialism versus the reputational costs of France's colonial wars. And the third mechanism centres on the Cold War dynamics that fostered party consolidation in West Germany while exacerbating political polarisation in France. The article argues that these early institutional pathways continue to shape contemporary European politics, sustaining a resilient political centre in Germany while leaving its French counterpart structurally volatile and thus subject to recurrent reconfigurations of the party system.

¹Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Corresponding author:

Johanna Elisabeth Kosak, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Alison Richard Building, 7 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DP, UK.
Email: jek73@cam.ac.uk



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Keywords

Christian Democracy, Post-war Europe, West Germany, France, State-building, Party systems

Introduction

For Konrad Adenauer, the German Rhineland constituted the cradle of Christian Democracy. Once an integral part of the Holy Roman Empire, Adenauer's home region is considered to be the geographic core of the Christian *Abendland*. Given its location at the border between Germany and France, one might suppose that the Christian Democratic influence emanating therefrom could have extended deeply into French political life. Indeed, the phrase 'Christian Democracy' is of French origin. Further, the first explicitly Christian Democratic organisation was established in France, and numerous intellectuals whose ideas informed the Christian Democratic tradition were French (Letamendia 1995, 1).¹

Yet, Christian Democracy seems to have failed to establish itself as a dominant political force in post-war France, particularly when contrasted with its remarkable success in post-war West Germany. This article addresses this discrepancy by analysing the divergent trajectories of Christian Democracy in post-war West Germany and post-war France to demonstrate how these early institutional pathways continue to shape contemporary European politics.

Conceptual framework and analytical scope

Christian Democracy is marked by considerable 'internal heterogeneity' (Accetti 2019, 193) and therefore represents neither a distinct *Weltanschauung* nor a mere variation of conservatism. Nevertheless, Christian Democratic parties can generally be characterised by their firm commitment to three specific principles: human rights, liberal democracy and integration. This commitment to integration is expressed both in the model of the catch-all *Volkspartei* and in the pursuit of transnational reconciliation, most notably embodied in their strong support for European integration (Irving 1979a, 54). In short, Christian Democracy can be described as an 'ideological tradition' that is defined by the attempt to articulate Christian principles within the framework of modern democracy (Accetti 2019, 193).

Although ancient in terms of Christian principles, Christian Democracy as a whole is a more modern phenomenon: it developed as a political response to the French Revolution and as a social response to the Industrial Revolution (Irving 1979b, 1). Its greatest historical influence, however, came at a particular point in the post-war period, which Müller has aptly described as 'The Christian Democratic Moment' (2011, 132–8)—a time when a fragile political landscape was acutely receptive to new ideological impulses. Accordingly, this article focuses on the immediate post-war period to trace the origins of the divergent consolidation of Christian Democracy in West Germany and France.

Rethinking strength and weakness in Christian Democracy

During that time the German Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) constituted one of the most powerful Christian Democratic parties in Continental Europe: in West Germany the alliance of the CDU and the Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union, CSU) governed continuously from 1949 to 1969 (Irving 1979a, 55). Apart from the years 1972–6, they have always formed the largest group in the Bundestag (Irving 1979a, 55), even winning an absolute majority under Adenauer in the *annus mirabilis* of 1957 (Irving 1979a, 59). Indeed, it seems reasonable, then, to attribute strength to post-war German Christian Democracy.

French Christian Democracy, on the other hand, ‘seems to have taken longer to take off; to have held office for much less time; . . . and finally, to have collapsed rapidly and ignominiously’ (Hanley 1991, 204–5). In this context, however, it should be noted that the Christian Democratic parties in France were not inherently weak: in fact, France’s Popular Republican Movement (Mouvement républicain populaire, MRP) can even be considered strong in some respects. While the two pre-war Christian Democratic parties—the Popular Democratic Party (Parti démocrate populaire) and Young Republic (Jeune République)—secured only around 3% of the vote in 1936, the MRP went on to win close to a quarter of the vote in the October 1945 French legislative elections (Irving 1979b, 217). It then entered a tripartite government under the executive leadership of General de Gaulle, together with the socialist Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière (French branch of the Workers’ International) and the French Communist Party (Accetti 2019, 209). According to Accetti, ‘This government proved to be one of the most effective and socially transformative of the whole postwar period’ (2019, 209), rapidly enacting a sweeping nationalisation of major industries and introducing a nationwide system of social security.

Overall, Christian Democrats played a key role throughout the Fourth Republic, serving in 23 of the 27 governments from 1944 to 1948, providing 3 of the Fourth Republic’s prime ministers (Schuman, Bidault and Pflimlin), and holding the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for much of the period from 1944 to 1954 (Irving 1979b, 217). Even after the eventual voluntary dissolution of the MRP in 1966, French Christian Democrats continued to form an important element in the various centrist coalitions of that time and retained influence as an underground but not insignificant ‘current of opinion’ (Accetti 2019, 235–6; Mayeur 1997, 85–9).

Once this is recognised, the absence of a single dominant Christian Democratic party in France need not be interpreted as evidence that the broader Christian Democratic tradition was weak. Rather, Christian Democracy may have assumed a distinct, context-specific form in France, operating through shifting centrist coalitions rather than a single dominant national party. Thus, the contrast between German ‘success’ and French ‘failure’ reveals less about the relative strength of Christian Democracy in the two countries than about the assumption that political success must take a single institutional form.

It is possible to conceptualise the EU itself as a political order significantly informed by Christian Democratic thought: from a neo-institutionalist perspective, Christian Democracy appears less as a nationally bounded phenomenon and more as a transnational framework of political thought. As Jacques Mallet wrote in a 1986 essay on the construction process of the European Community, ‘The project of a European Community was born out of the conjunction between a few men who . . . shared the same convictions. These men were Christian Democrats’ (in Portelli and Jansen 1986, 247). When viewed through this lens, the idea that Christian Democracy failed in France while succeeding in Germany appears less persuasive: in both countries it contributed, albeit in different ways, to the establishment of what would become one of the most enduring Christian Democratic projects—the EU itself. From this perspective, Christian Democracy may be seen not as a vanished or marginalised force—in France or anywhere else in Europe—but as a banal element of Continental Europe’s background institutional framework and political culture, so deeply embedded as to have become almost invisible (Accetti 2019, 247).

Yet, the contemporary standing of Christian Democracy varies considerably between France and Germany. The following sections identify three key reasons for this divergence—historical in origin, yet of enduring relevance.

Religiosity and confessional culture

A core reason for the divergent trajectories lies in how each country managed the religious-confessional cleavage after 1945.

‘The MRP’s biggest problem was that it was, *malgré soi*, a . . . Catholic party’ (Irving 1979b, 220). In France the long-standing Republican–Catholic antagonism institutionalised by *laïcité* made anything perceived as clerical structurally suspect. It was this enduring antagonism between Catholicism and Republicanism, originating from the Revolution of 1789, that constrained the institutional development of Christian Democracy in France. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, successive confrontations—from Napoleon’s religious policies to the 1905 law on the separation of church and state and *la guerre scolaire*—entrenched the Catholic–Republican divide into what Suffert described as ‘la ligne Maginot’ between the right and the left (1960, 71). The anti-clericalism of the left and the anti-Republicanism of the right, exacerbated by the Dreyfus affair and the traumas of the early Third Republic, left little space for the emergence of a progressive, democratic Catholic current—the natural sociological base for Christian Democracy elsewhere in Europe.

Whilst Germany was marked by a confessional cleavage as well, the Nazi dictatorship reconfigured interconfessional relations in two ways: first, its wide-reaching mobilisation of the population for the regime’s totalising political project dismantled many existing social institutions and forms of differentiation (Trentmann 2023). Second, the experience of tyranny generated new forms of inter-Christian solidarity. In France, the Second World War and *l’Occupation* likewise contributed to a certain reconciliation

between Catholics and Republicans and produced an *élite* of leaders with a *Résistance* background. However, due to the historically polarised party system, this rapprochement could not be converted into a broad political vehicle: a significant number of conservatives gravitated towards the MRP largely because their own parties had been discredited by their association with the Vichy regime—‘They were *with*, but not *of*, the MRP’ (Irving 1979b, 218).

In contrast, in Germany the immediate pressure to establish a functioning state prompted a more pragmatic approach. Adenauer and former Centre Party (Zentrum) figures in the Rhineland chose not to reconstitute a Catholic party but to found a cross-confessional *Union* that would ‘be Christian’ in a general—rather than denominational—sense. Strategically, they downplayed confessional planks outside Catholic regions—for instance, in regard to educational policies—and moved towards a market-oriented programme to attract Protestant and liberal voters who had previously backed the German People’s Party/German Democratic Party (Deutsche Volkspartei/Deutsche Demokratische Partei) (Bark and Gress 1989, 111–15). The result was a successful cleavage conversion: the old Catholic–Protestant divide was reframed as a unifying Christian idiom of moral reconstruction within a catch-all *Volkspartei*.

The notion of moral reconstruction points to the next key point of divergence between Christian Democracy’s consolidation in Germany and France.

Historical legacies: fascism in Germany, empire in France

In Germany the experience of Nazism created an existential imperative to rebuild political life on explicitly moral grounds. This acted as what Irving called a ‘catalyst’ for the CDU (1979b, 114): party founders set out to establish a consciously centrist project that framed religiously inflected conservatism as a prudent ‘retreat into tried and tested moral traditions’ and a path to ‘moral redemption from fascism’ (Accetti 2019, 197, 194), led by impressive leaders drawing legitimacy from resistance biographies.² The rhetoric was direct: Nazism had arisen when society turned away from Christian values; to prevent its recurrence, those values must again guide public life.³ This attitude was deeply ingrained in the German conscience and even enshrined in the *Grundgesetz*: its preamble opens with the words ‘Conscious of its responsibility before God and man . . .’. This, however, does not amount to the endorsement of any particular religion but, rather, expresses a symbolic commitment to ethical responsibility. In the post-Nazi context, the clause functioned as an act of moral humility—a reminder that rulers can never be allowed to elevate themselves to a god-like position, as Hitler had done.

While segments of the French population were also complicit in Nazi crimes during *l’Occupation*, the issue of collective guilt was far more pronounced in Germany. As a result, the German population was arguably more receptive to the moral framework advanced by Christian Democracy. It offered both an ethical orientation and a narrative of moral renewal that many contemporaries interpreted as the prospect of national and personal redemption.

France, meanwhile, faced a different historical burden of guilt: its colonial legacy. The ‘thorny issue of decolonisation’ (Accetti 2019, 210) became a major constraint on the development of Christian Democracy in post-war France. While Germany’s confrontation with its fascist past served as a catalyst for national reconstruction, France’s reckoning with its imperial past had the opposite effect: it destabilised party politics and eroded the moral credibility of the MRP. Initially driven by universalist ideals, the MRP became increasingly associated with what Thomas describes as ‘the worst of colonial repression in the North African Maghreb, black Africa, Indo-China and Madagascar’, abandoning its Christian Democratic moral compass in an attempt to preserve its political relevance (Thomas 2003, 382, 384). Thus, while Germany’s past generated the moral urgency that propelled Christian Democracy forward, France’s past imposed ideological burdens that made its Christian Democratic project collapse under the weight of historical contradiction.

Lastly, let us consider the influence of external actors.

The international environment shaped by the Cold War

The international context of the Cold War played a decisive role in shaping the divergent fortunes of Christian Democracy in post-war West Germany and France. During the late 1940s, both the US and the UK actively fostered Christian Democratic movements in Europe as part of a broader strategy to secure political stability and limit Soviet influence in the emerging Cold War order (Gottfried 2007, 715). Within this geopolitical framework, Germany assumed particular importance as a symbolic and strategic—and already divided—front-line state in the ideological struggle for Europe. As Irving observes, ‘Stalin contributed at least as much as Truman to the emergence of powerful Christian Democratic parties in the decade after the war’ (1979a, 57).

In France, however, the same international forces had a more ambivalent effect. France’s historically polarised party system and the enduring strength of the French Communist Party—one of Western Europe’s largest Communist parties and directly aligned with Moscow—limited the MRP’s political manoeuvrability. Participation in US-led initiatives such as the Marshall Plan became a source of domestic tension, and Cold War divisions exacerbated pre-existing rifts between the MRP, the Gaullists and the left (Accetti 2019, 209).

The result was the opposite of the German experience: rather than consolidating Christian Democracy, the Cold War in France strengthened the left by intensifying ideological polarisation. Crucially, this fragmentation continues to shape the functioning of the political centre in contemporary Europe.

From post-war state-building to contemporary dynamics in the political centre

This article argues that the divergent trajectories of Christian Democracy in post-war West Germany and France, explained above, continue to manifest themselves in the

concrete functioning of the political centre in contemporary Europe. In Germany the institutional consolidation of Christian Democracy within the Western bloc reinforced its domestic institutionalisation during the formative phase of state-building, producing a party-based centre capable of absorbing considerable social and ideological change with little organisational rupture. The CDU/CSU's enduring role as a *Volkspartei* is reflected in its consistent ability to integrate heterogeneous social coalitions within a stable party framework, from Adenauer's cross-confessional alliances to the *Große Koalition* under Angela Merkel.

France, by contrast, exhibits a structurally different pattern. The MRP's failure to establish a durable Christian Democratic party centre during the post-war period left no comparable organisational anchor for centrist politics. Instead, the Fifth Republic institutionalised a form of executive-centred political competition in which centrist forces have repeatedly re-emerged through personal leadership rather than stable party organisation. From Gaullist dominance in the early Fifth Republic to the emergence of Macron's Renaissance, centrist mobilisation has largely occurred outside stable party structures, drawing selectively on multiple ideological traditions, including Christian Democracy, yet without producing a stable, institutionalised centrist—or even explicitly Christian Democratic—party. While electorally successful in the short term, Macron's movement illustrates the difficulties of translating presidential authority into organisational continuity, as reflected in its current state of rapid internal fragmentation.

Conclusion

The post-war trajectories of Christian Democracy in West Germany and France were not the result of the inherent strengths or weaknesses of Christian Democracy, but of distinctive circumstances that actively shaped their development. Religiosity and confessional culture, the formative impact of historical legacies and the international environment shaped by the Cold War all enabled German Christian Democracy to flourish while its French counterpart struggled to take root. Crucially, these differences have not remained confined to the post-war era. Rather, they continue to structure the functioning and resilience of political centrism in both countries today, reproducing divergent patterns of centrist consolidation that have become all the more consequential at a time when extremist movements on both the left and the right are gaining ground. Under these conditions, the capacity of centrist forces to sustain political moderation emerges as a key determinant of democratic resilience. In this sense, the historical trajectory of Christian Democracy is not merely of retrospective interest but merits its place in contemporary debates, offering important insights into the institutional conditions under which a stable democratic political centre can be sustained.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Christopher Bickerton of Queens' College, University of Cambridge, whose stimulating tutorials in Comparative Politics provided important intellectual inspiration for this article. I would also like to express my thanks to Member of the European Parliament Alexandra Mehnert and her parliamentary assistants for enabling me to gain valuable

insight into the workings of the CDU in its European context during my study visit to the European Parliament.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Johanna Elisabeth Kosak  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9861-8129>

Notes

1. Early Christian Democratic thought drew on the ideas of figures such as Félicité de Lamennais, Frédéric Ozanam and Marc Sangnier (Bouscaren 1956, 542). Their work developed against drop the backdrop of France's long church–state conflict after the Revolution and helped to lay the intellectual foundations for later Catholic democratic movements such as Le Sillon.
2. Adenauer, for instance, was imprisoned in the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt on Hitler in 1944 (Bark and Gress 1989, 109–11). This experience of persecution and resistance positioned him to personify the *new path* towards an anti-Nazi republic and the moral reconstruction through Christian Democracy.
3. This post-war moral reconstruction did not, however, emerge in a vacuum. In Germany, Catholicism had historically developed as an oppositional force to state power and nationalist excess, particularly since the *Kulturkampf* (Anderson 2000, 125).

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Author biography



Johanna Elisabeth Kosak is a Cambridge Trust Scholar at the University of Cambridge. She previously completed a study visit with a German Member of the European Parliament within the European People's Party and served as a German delegate to the youth engagement group of the G20.