




COVID-19 in the 2021 Federal Election: The Dog That Did Not Bark

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC UNDER THE GRAND COALITION (2020 TO LATE 2021)

On January 27, 2020, the corona virus reached Germany. A man in the Starnberg region near Munich in the south of Germany was infected, as a spokesperson of the Bavarian Ministry of Health confirmed. At work, he had come into contact with a colleague arriving from Shanghai (who later turned out to be infected herself), and had been isolated in hospital. He was in a good condition, and the risk of the virus spreading across Germany continued to be considered low, said the spokesman. A day later, the Federal Minister of Health, Jens Spahn (CDU), declared that Germany was ‘well prepared’ for the new type of infection, and advised an attitude of ‘calm vigilance’ for the population. The number of known infections had risen to four (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2023). The first major outbreak happened two weeks later when of the 300

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participants in a carnival event in Heinsberg (North Rhine-Westphalia) many came down with a COVID-19 infection. Identifying, tracing, and isolating those from the group who might be infected turned out to be a task beyond the local authorities' capability. On March 9, 2020, the first two casualties from a COVID-19 infection were confirmed, a number that was to rise quickly: By the end of April, Germany had registered 6500 deaths from the new virus, by the end of May the overall number had risen to about 8500.

For the government, the new pandemic (which had been declared as such by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020) was a major challenge. While a pandemic was in principle not unexpected and had been the subject of administrative exercises as well as reports to the Bundestag (Deutscher Bundestag 2013), its advent constituted undoubtedly a sudden crisis and forced the German 'Grand Coalition' government under Chancellor Angela Merkel to take important decisions largely under conditions of uncertainty, i.e. without being in possession of sufficient knowledge to properly calculate the risks of alternatives.¹ Such crisis situations, it is routinely claimed, are 'the hour of the executive'. However, in the German political system, well known for its 'semisovereignty' (see Katzenstein, 1987), such expectations have to be tempered, as will be demonstrated below.

This contribution to the analysis of the German Bundestag election of 2021 focuses on the role played by the coronavirus pandemic.² We will first look briefly at the government's decision and consultation processes and its communication strategies, before dealing in some more detail with the regional and local dimension of the issue, the behaviour of political parties and then the issue salience in the election campaign. We conclude with a look at how the incoming Traffic-Light coalition consisting of the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Liberals dealt with the pandemic.

¹ For a recent discussion about the role of uncertainty (albeit with a focus on international relations) see Katzenstein and Seybert (2018).

² A comprehensive analysis of the government's measures to fight the pandemic is thus as much beyond the goal of this contribution as is a systematic assessment of its successes and failures.

DECISION AND CONSULTATION PROCESS

While the Basic Law endows the German Chancellor with a strong *‘Richtlinienkompetenz’* (competence to issue guidelines) for his or her government, the realities of coalition government, federalism, and party competition mean that what is actually happening on the ground is largely a form of ‘interdependent management’ (Hebestreit & Korte, 2022, p. 152). Many actors have the power to block or postpone decisions because of participation rights and veto positions. This has long been known as *‘Politikverflechtung’* (joint decision making), and studies have shown that it favours incremental change and costly solutions (Krick & Blumenthal, 2013). For an acute crisis, when quick decisions are demanded, this is not an ideal context. While the Chancellery can be seen as the power centre of German politics, its powers do not reach as far as issuing concrete commands to Federal Ministries.³ Under the auspices of crisis management, Germany has thus been classified as comparatively weak on vertical coordination, but stronger than unitary states in coordination with regional bodies (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 327).

The reliance on other political partners in governance for political reasons was mirrored in the pandemic by the necessity to bring in outside knowledge. No ministerial bureaucracy has first class competence in the infectiological and epidemiological areas that were central for assessing measures to contain the spread of the pandemic and minimise loss of life. Chancellor Merkel (herself a trained scientist with a PhD in physical chemistry) quickly sought advice. But contrary to e.g. the UK with its Government Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Medical Officer, the German advisory system has no formal positions in the ministerial bureaucracy charged with connecting scientific knowledge with policy making.⁴ The government was thus free to choose advisers, and did so from the ranks of the Robert Koch Institut (RKI—a government agency focusing on epidemiology) and carefully selected academics. Several of the country’s high-profile research institutions (like the National Academy of Scientists Leopoldina, the Max Planck, Fraunhofer, and Helmholtz Societies) also entered the public arena with published recommendations. The

³ This is because the *Richtlinienkompetenz* is balanced by the *Ressortprinzip*, by which each Minister conducts the affairs of their department independently and under their own responsibility (see Basic Law article 65).

⁴ See for more detail, also in comparison, Busch (2021, 2022).

result was an advice system which remained open to differing interpretations even if they challenged established positions, but also a panoply of opinions sometimes resembling a bazaar—puzzling for citizens seeking opinion leadership in a confusing and threatening situation.

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

Government communication was conducted on two levels. On the one hand, there was a daily press conference conducted by the head of the RKI, Prof. Lothar Wieler, giving updates on infection numbers and assessing the situation. This kept the information on the pandemic in the technocratic sphere and avoided the dangers of politicisation that exist if a minister or even a prime minister sits at the same table. The second level was interventions by leading politicians, which (since rare) had accordingly greater impact. Of particular importance was a televised address that Chancellor Angela Merkel—known for her low key, no-nonsense approach to public speaking—delivered at prime time on 18 March. Such addresses are a rarity in Germany, only to be used in times perceived as a national crisis. And accordingly the Chancellor—for whom this was the first such address after 15 years in office—spoke in very earnest words about the ‘dramatic changes’ the coronavirus brought to the country and how testing it was for its public life and social fabric. While she announced no concrete measures, everybody knew that school and kindergarten closures had been imposed a few days earlier, and borders to Austria, Denmark, France and Switzerland had been closed—something unthinkable so far.⁵ Merkel appealed to her audience to behave responsibly in what she said was ‘the biggest challenge to the country since the Second World War’ (Merkel, 2020). The central message of her speech was often quoted afterwards: ‘This is serious. Please do take it seriously’. She combined profound thanks to especially everyone working in the medical sector with an assurance that supplies of food and all other necessities were safe.

With this combined communication strategy, the government managed to stabilise public opinion. The drastic, unprecedented measures found

⁵ Only a few days later, on 22 March, curfews were imposed prohibiting contact with more than one person from outside one’s own household. It is important to remember that at that time no therapy and no vaccination against the virus existed.

support: Opinion polls showed that roughly three quarters of the population thought they were ‘good’ or even ‘very good’, while only a sixth saw them critically (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2020). And in terms of political opinion, this was indeed ‘the hour of the executive’, as support for the Chancellor’s CDU rocketed from 28 to 38%, while support for the Greens and AfD fell and that for the coalition partner SPD remained stable.

THE PANDEMIC AS A CHALLENGE TO GOVERNANCE

The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest synchronous global crisis in living memory. By the end of the first year, the coronavirus had been responsible for 55,000 deaths in Germany alone. By the Bundestag election in late September 2021, that figure had risen to 95,000, and when Olaf Scholz succeeded Angela Merkel in early December 2021, the number of COVID-19 deaths stood at 115,000 (World Health Organization, 2023). On the global level, there were 2 million deaths by the end of 2020, and 5.5 million by the end of 2021. Compared with similar countries like France, Italy, the UK and the US, Germany did rather well in terms of deaths per million inhabitants in the first wave of infections (until summer 2020), but had an unremarkable performance in the second wave (winter 2020/2021) (Our World in Data, 2023). Overall, the pandemic performance of the Merkel government thus has to be ranked between good and satisfactory.

As reports on the conduct of the pandemic show, this is a crisis that has left its toll on individuals in position of responsibility who faced impossible choices⁶; but it was also a crisis that posed unparalleled challenges to governance mechanisms (Boin et al., 2021; Hood, 2022), while at the same time raising thorny issues and passionate debates about the role of individual freedom in the face of a pandemic (Nullmeier, 2021). Political systems had to cope with problems of delayed detection of the pandemic, further delay of taking time to activate a ‘crisis response’ and then of choosing the right policy tools. In a federal country like Germany, all these challenges were exacerbated by differing regional problem load, differing preferences and difficulties in agreeing on solutions.

⁶ For the German case, see Gloger and Mascolo (2021) for a detailed description of the ‘inside’ of decision making during the pandemic.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

As seen above, infections with the COVID-19 virus did not start uniformly across the country, but in local and regional clusters. Germany being a (strongly) federal country,⁷ this meant that regional attempts to contain the spread of the disease were a reaction to be expected. Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia, which had been affected first, reacted with specific, but different local measures, which mainly sought to identify and isolate the (then small) regional clusters of infections. When the disease became more widespread in early March, measures such as the closing of kindergartens and schools, as well as delays in the start of university terms were taken.

However, the differences in action were not only caused by differences in regional COVID-19 infection incidences, but also deeply rooted in the federal order. For the central legal instrument to fight a pandemic the Infection Protection Act (*‘Infektionsschutzgesetz’* or IPA) put the *Länder* in charge and confined the federal level to a mainly advisory role.⁸ As a consequence, the Chancellor and her government were forced to act in cooperation and coordination with the *Länder*. The main instrument for that coordination was the *Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz* (MPK), the body bringing together the sixteen Minister Presidents of the Federal Republic’s constituent states. In normal times, this conference of state heads of government meets four times a year, twice followed by a meeting with the Chancellor afterwards for an exchange of views. During the pandemic, however, the number of meetings rose steeply (Schnabel et al., 2022, p. 49). The MPK thus became the leading forum to coordinate the German state’s reaction to the pandemic (ibid.: 55). Since most of the containment measures under the Infection Protection Act are decided on the Land level, this was the appropriate response. And it is interesting to see how a forum not even mentioned in the Basic Law, in a moment of crisis, could play such a central role.

⁷ See for an excellent, condensed description of the federal system and its historical rootedness Benz (2022).

⁸ The Infection Protection Act was amended in the course of the pandemic, giving the federal level more competences; however, these only came in at a later stage in the COVID-19 pandemic, namely at the end of March 2020.

The joint meetings of the MPK with the Chancellor—sometimes as often as once a week—were followed by a press conference of the Chancellor, the chair and the co-chair of the MPK to announce agreements. Changes to the IPA were agreed which gave the Federal Health Ministry broad new competences designed to protect the German health system as a whole, such as demanding information from travellers, ensuring the supply of medicines and protective gear (Münc, 2020, p. 212). These competences, however, could only be exercised if the Bundestag declared ‘an epidemic situation of national significance’ (which it did for the first time on 25 March 2020).

Another avenue for regional input into the political situation was the role played by the *Land* parliaments. The case study conducted on the Rhineland-Palatinate parliament by Jennewein and Korte-Bernardt (2021) is instructive. It shows a parliament determined to continue its important democratic role by adjusting its rules to the necessities of the pandemic. When passing the budget in late March 2020, only 63 of 101 MPs could participate; the plenary session was live streamed to the internet. And for later meetings, the parliament agreed to move to a bigger building where all MPs could participate while keeping their distances. The President of the *Landtag* emphasised the importance of all MPs being able to conduct debates and scrutinise government actions especially in times of crisis, and their role as transmission belts between the population and the political decision mechanism, thus limiting the uncertainty that many citizens felt (Jennewein & Korte-Bernardt, 2021, p. 105). Communication between citizens and politicians was successful, as is evidenced by strong trust levels for political institutions and democracy (Jennewein & Korte-Bernardt, 2021, p. 108).

Opinion polls, however, also revealed a clear preference of citizens for unitary federal rules in the measures against the pandemic rather than regional variations (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2020b). There was criticism of the existing ‘patchwork’ of different measures and of the ‘shopping tourism’ it caused, but these differences were linked to variations in regional pandemic pressure. To take these into account rather than imposing unitary solutions meant that local knowledge and administrative experience were taken into account—a clear plus when attempting to minimise the substantial restrictions to freedom necessitated by the pandemic. Federalism, after all, can be regarded as a system of competition for the best solution—and is thus well suited for a complex situation with many unknowns and considerable uncertainty.

The possibility provided by federalism to advocate different positions and solutions was also used by a number of ambitious *Land* politicians to increase their political profile. Since Chancellor Merkel had indicated that she was stepping down at the *Bundestag* election due in autumn 2021, the race was on who the candidate for the chancellorship would be for the CDU/CSU. Markus Söder, the Minister President of Bavaria and chair of the CSU coined the phrase ‘Team Vorsicht’ (team caution) for his emphasis on preferring restrictions; Armin Laschet, Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia (and the eventual Chancellor Candidate) tried not to fall behind (Münch, 2020, p. 214).

PARTY POLICIES AND THE PANDEMIC

The correlate to the crisis being ‘the hour of the executive’ is the ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect: In an acute crisis, citizens wish to support a government if it is evidently trying to do its best to cope with the situation. Party competition, a mainstay of politics in liberal democracies, is suspended, if only temporarily. This was also the case after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. ‘Never was there so little opposition’, as the German weekly *Der Spiegel* put it in late March 2020 (Bukow, 2021, p. 185). This effect was not confined to Germany. As a survey fielded in 15 Western European countries during March 2020 indicates, the tangible crisis of anti-pandemic measures (such as lockdowns and other restrictions to citizens’ rights) produced *more* rather than *less* support for governments and the political forces which support them: Vote intentions for the party of the Prime Minister or President increased on average by 4% points, and trust in government as well as satisfaction with democracy by about 3% points (Bol et al., 2020, p. 502).⁹ In the German case, the rally-round-the-flag effect was further increased by the fact that the two largest parties—and principal antagonists—, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, were in a Grand Coalition and governed together. Steeply rising support, however, mainly went to the CDU/CSU, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s party, while support for the SPD flatlined: Between March and April 2020, vote intention for the *Union* grew from 26 to 39%, while the respective value for the SPD remained at 16% (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2020a).

⁹ See also Cunningham (2020) and Jäckle and Wagschal (2022). While the effect *per se* is uncontested, there is a debate about the precise causes (Schraff, 2021).

This rise in specific and diffuse support can be considered good news for liberal democracy, especially since the years before the pandemic had seen political dissatisfaction expressing itself through the rise of support for right-wing populist parties across many countries (see e.g. Manow, 2018; Moffitt, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). However, such general support does not mean all parties in government reacted in the same way. As an expert survey across 31 countries (EU member states plus the UK, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey) by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey team demonstrates, political parties interpreted the threat posed by the pandemic through their ideological predispositions. This means that empirical data show how initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can to a large extent be predicted by parties' ideological positions on the economic left-right and cultural GAL-TAN dimensions (Rovny et al., 2022). Left wing parties thus preferred containment and stricter government enforcement, while GAL parties were more likely to rely on science in policymaking. Government status moderated parties' responses: It became stronger on containment, enforcement and guided by science in decision making (*ibid.*).

Such research findings offer an explanation also for the behaviour of German parties. The opposition AfD, for example, was found to be not only threatened in its political business model in so far as the issue of immigration more or less vanished from political discourse in the face of the pandemic, but also facing a conflict between two other ideological mainstays, namely elite critique and authoritarianism (Lehmann & Zehnter, 2022). As a result, vote intention support for the party, as indicated by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen opinion poll, dropped from 14% in January 2020 to 9% in May. The party reacted to that by positioning itself as the 'party of the Basic Law' (Ruhose, 2020, p. 23), claiming to defend citizens' fundamental rights against the Merkel government's anti-pandemic measures.

In the German parties' election programs for the 2021 general election, COVID-19 played an important, but varying role. Given the pandemic's impact on individuals, society, the economy, and politics since its start in early 2020, it was to be expected that voters would look to parties' positions on this issue—and that parties would therefore devote considerable attention to it. An analysis of the German parties' election

programs corroborates that expectation: The subject featured prominently in nearly all programmatic documents (Landeszentrale, 2021).¹⁰ The virus and/or the pandemic was mentioned no less than 67 times in the election program of The Left Party, 44 times by the Greens, 28 and 27 times respectively by the CDU and the SPD, 26 and 24 times by the AfD and the FDP, and only 8 times by the CSU. This considerable range correlated with different positions vis-à-vis the pandemic: The *Linke* chose to mainly speak of the ‘corona crisis’ (Coronakrise), linking the pandemic with the ‘injustices of capitalism’ and other systemic shortcomings, e.g. in the health system, that in their view were underlined by the virus. The SPD also used the crisis aspect of corona often, but in a limited way; and it linked mentions of the pandemic with government reactions to the pandemic that it hoped would reflect positively on its efforts in government including a child bonus (*Corona-Kinderbonus*) and a COVID relief package ‘*Corona-Konjunkturpaket*’. The AfD in its language focused especially on what it termed ‘corona measures’ and ‘corona policies’ (*Corona-Maßnahmen* and *Corona-Politik*), thus underlining its criticisms of governmental counter-measures to the pandemic. The CDU highlighted aspects where policies championed by the party had increased resilience during the crisis, e.g. that a frugal fiscal policy had opened up the room for manoeuvre to be generous with compensation payments during the pandemic. The FDP pointed out that growth was needed to pay back ‘corona debt’ and that the pandemic had shown how economic change required a stream of new ideas. The CSU (with the fewest mentions of the pandemic in the election program) stated that the pandemic had brought a new dynamic to the digitalisation of Germany’s schools. Parties thus used the pandemic to frame their specific political preferences for the voters.

ISSUE SALIENCE IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

What role did the pandemic play in the election campaign for the 2021 Bundestag election? As stated above, the duration and depth of the COVID-19 pandemic led many, including the political parties, to expect that this would be the defining topic on which the election would be decided. After all, in opinion polls the pandemic had been considered ‘the

¹⁰ The following figures as well as statements are based on the author’s analysis of the parties’ election programs. The programs are available at Landeszentrale (2021).

most pressing problem facing Germany’ almost from its start. The *Politbarometer* tracking poll has the coronavirus jumping from 2% in February 2020 to 25% by early and 82% by late March (see Fig. 19.1). This is an extremely high value, which is historically only paralleled briefly in 2005 (unemployment) and 2015 (refugees). It indicates serious problem pressure, to which the political system has to respond to be legitimate.

We saw above that the pandemic had led to a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect in Germany and that support for Chancellor Merkel’s CDU had climbed significantly after the onset of the crisis; in addition, opinion polls suggested that about three quarters of the population supported the measures that the government took. This support remained stable which points to general satisfaction with the government’s handling of the crisis. Such an interpretation is corroborated by scholarly assessments of the effectiveness of government policies as a reaction to the initial COVID-19 outbreak. Comparing the relationship between the strength and early onset of government interventions, on the one hand, and the mortality curve of the epidemic, on the other hand, they find an inverse relationship. Thus Germany can be credited with effective reaction to the first wave of the virus (Dergiades et al., 2022). Aggregate statistics of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants support that first assessment: By January 2022, Germany had recorded 138, while the respective number for comparable countries were 190 (France), 227 (UK), and 232 (Italy) (Johns Hopkins, 2023). In other important areas of government action—mainly the economy—Germany also fared well. Large increases in unemployment were avoided due to massive support for businesses and a rapid roll-out of short-time work arrangements (Ebbinghaus & Lehner, 2022; Eurofound, 2022; Hancké et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2020).

Given what we know generally about the (positive) relationship between government competence evaluations and voting chances for parties (Green & Jennings, 2017, p. 42), and the positive assessment and track record for the Merkel government as demonstrated by opinion polls, general expectations were that the handling of the pandemic would be a high salience issue during the election campaign and might determine its outcome. But these expectations were confounded by developments in the importance German voters attributed to the different problem areas. As Fig. 19.1 demonstrates, the pole position of the coronavirus pandemic as the most pressing problem (which it had held since the beginning in early 2020) receded as the election campaign started to gain traction in late spring/early summer of 2021. Other topics, mainly the climate issue

and to some extent the issue of social inequality, gained prominence. Six weeks to a month before the election, the importance of climate change overtook the pandemic. Voting day approached, and in the last *Politbarometer* before the election (on 17 September) the pandemic was ranked as the most important problem by only 28%, while 47% considered the climate problem to be the most pressing.

This change of priorities was surprising. As the issue that had dominated for so long dropped in importance, the topic that had much benefited Chancellor Merkel's CDU/CSU could not deliver in terms of political support. Instead, as election exit polls indicated, voters had taken other subjects to heart for their decisions in the election. As an Infratest dimap exit poll indicates, the issue of social safety turned out to be the most important (28%), followed by the environment and climate (22%) and employment and the economy (22%). The handling of the corona crisis was far behind and was considered decisive for their vote by only 7% of voters (Infratest dimap, 2021). A differentiation by party preference shows an even bigger out-distancing of the pandemic: For voters of the CDU, the SPD, the FDP and the Greens, the pandemic did not feature among the decisive topics; only AfD and Left Party voters considered them decisive—18% in the case of the AfD (after 40% for immigration),

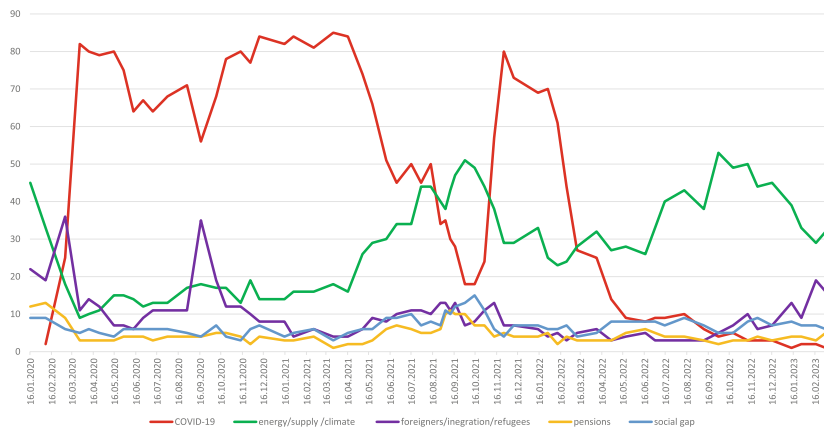


Fig. 19.1 The most important political problems facing Germany, January 2020–February 2023 (*Source* Author's calculations after data from Forschungsgruppe Wahlen Politbarometer)

and 6% for Left Party voters (after 39% social safety, 32% environment and climate, and 12% employment and the economy).

We can conclude that the issue salience of the pandemic, as measured by the ‘most important problem facing the country’ metric, dropped substantially during the election campaign. Voters seem to have decided that elections are mainly about the future, and that the pandemic will soon be a thing of the past which can therefore be disregarded. In addition, the substantial consensus that characterised most measures to fight the pandemic, but especially the CDU/CSU and the SPD as the two members of the Grand Coalition government, made that policy a bad yardstick for distinguishing between them in an election. Only supporters of the parties on the left and right fringes of the party system, The Left Party and the AfD, thought the pandemic was still an important consideration when making a choice about the future.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE INCOMING TRAFFIC-LIGHT COALITION

As Fig. 19.1 demonstrates, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly returned to pole position in the ‘most pressing problem’ category after the election. As negotiations for what was to become the Traffic-Light coalition of SPD, Greens, and FDP were under way, a fourth wave hit the country, with infection rates higher than in the previous waves. But as vaccinations began to cover an ever growing share of the population, the danger posed by the pandemic declined. The next wave hitting Germany in the late winter 2021/2022 consisted of the ‘omicron’ variant, which was more infectious, but substantially less dangerous than previous variants of the coronavirus. This contributed to declining fear of the virus as reflected in the movement in opinion polls. Another, very substantial reason for the shift in opinion polls was the upsurge of another big problem, namely the Russian invasion of Ukraine starting on 24 February 2022. This war came with substantial threats for Germany’s energy supply—the country imported almost 50% of its gas from Russia, and much of it was used for industry production and domestic heating. Some—but few in Germany—had seen it coming. On 23 December 2021, a mere two months before Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, the Editorial Board of the *Wall Street Journal* spoke of ‘Germany’s Energy Surrender’ and criticised that ‘rarely has a country worked so hard to make itself vulnerable’ (2021). Now the new government had to keep Germany warm and functioning.

So Chancellor Olaf Scholz's new government had a baptism of fire which it had not expected. A combined security, energy, and potential economic crisis followed directly on the heels of the global pandemic crisis. One early change regarding the pandemic was an attempt to tidy up the somewhat chaotic situation around policy advice for the core executive. In December 2021 the government set up a 'corona expert council' consisting of 19 experts with varying specialisations. It was to meet regularly and thus end the unordered situation which prevailed at the beginning of the pandemic. This had been a Green Party demand already in the summer of 2020 (Bundesregierung, 2023).¹¹

We have argued that in spite of the dominating position for nearly two years, opinion polls as well as exit polls provide evidence that the pandemic played a clearly subordinate role in voters' decisions at the ballot box. Some observers seemingly find that hard to accept. One of the leading analysts of German politics for example wrote after the election that 'unsurprisingly, the coronavirus left its imprint decisively on the election year' (Korte, 2022, p. 43). While that claim is tempered by the statement that 'the topic indirectly influenced all other areas', this is not far from taking a 'post hoc, ergo propter hoc' position. Maybe it is hard to accept that something as all imposing as the COVID-19 pandemic could not leave lasting traces? Would that violate a sense of proportion? The opinion poll evidence mentioned above demonstrates that voters did not look back when making their electoral choice, but instead looked ahead at problems of the future—and who in their view was best placed to tackle them.

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¹¹ The website of the council is to be found at <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/expertinnenrat-der-bundesregierung-2002396> (last accessed: 20 March 2023).

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