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Abstract of the dissertation: "Den Männern überlassen wir's nicht! Erfolgreiche Frauen in der CSU."  
(“We don't leave it to the Men! Successful women in the Christian Social Union)

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### **All that glitters is not gold**

Access for German women to political participation varies along party lines

Compared to many other democracies worldwide, one might think German women are well off according to their political representation. At first glance one sees a female head of government, Chancellor Angela Merkel, and 32 percent women representatives in the federal parliament, the Bundestag. However, not all women in Germany have equal opportunities to participate in the political process.. The extent to which they are granted access to political power depends very much on their party affiliation. There is a wide gap between the progressive Left Party 'Die Linke', with 45 percent female members, and the conservative Christian Social Union 'CSU', with merely 18 percent. Since Gender Studies at German Universities tends to be more progressive, much analysis has been made of those parties which already have a large number of female members. Literally no attention has been paid to those parties who still have a longer way to go. My dissertation is about the circumstances women face within the CSU, in an attempt to close the research gap and to find out more about the reasons for the smaller proportion of women in a more conservative party environment.

### **The study: We don't leave it to the men. Successful women in the Christian Social Union**

To begin with, the analysis called for a close look at the party's starting point. The CSU has the lowest representation of women among its party members. Even more striking, the number of active female participants is even lower: only eleven percent of women hold an office within the party, such as chairman of a regional branch or a committee; only 16 percent of the party's elected officials are female, which is again the lowest percentage among all German parties that are represented in the parliaments. Nevertheless, the party remains the most successful with women voters of all ages, recently gaining 40 percent of the female vote at the Bavarian state elections. This continuing success has made it unnecessary for the CSU to examine closely the reasons for the women's reluctance to participate in the political process.

Despite the discouraging conditions, there are women in the CSU who have become successful politicians at a local, state, federal and European level. They hold positions as mayors, state secretaries, ministers or heads of parliaments. These women have managed to achieve great success, they dealt effectively with inequalities, discrimination, and defeats and they are doing their job at eye level with their male colleagues. They are role models for other women, they encourage future female candidates, and they prove that women are able to achieve their goals even within a sometimes hostile environment. These women were the subjects of my examination and the central research question was:

➤ How do women manage to establish themselves successfully in a disadvantageous and sometimes even discriminatory environment that was created without regard for their demands?

Of course the answers to this question can be transposed to other environments with similar preconditions. This makes the results of this dissertation even more valuable not only to women themselves but also to parties, organizations, and corporations with similar structures.

### **Results and assumptions**

It became clear that an interest in politics and the will to participate was developed very early in these women's socialization process. More than half of the sample had parents who were active in social or political organizations. Thus the politicians-to-be had the opportunity to notice the terms and conditions of political involvement from an early age. They reported that they felt well prepared for the demands they were confronted with once they got involved. Even so, the majority had to get used to the conventions that had been shaped by men over decades without regard for the needs of women. That means especially the gatherings in smoke-filled back rooms, communication customs and network modalities. All women reported that they had longed for more support and directives, but came to terms with the fact that for the most part they had to learn from their own mistakes and defeats. But still no interviewee lost heart because of these initial difficulties. They all continued or even strengthened their efforts mostly unimpressed.

In a democratic system, majorities make the decisions. Of course, an 18 percent minority cannot implement anything against the will of the 82 percent majority. Therefore, the men within the CSU set not only the political agenda, but can also strongly influence which women are elected into responsible positions. Since there are no primaries for candidates in Germany, it is up to the party assembly not only to decide who will take over party positions but also who runs for public office. The male delegates naturally favor the kind of women who do not question the ancestral order but condone the status quo, in order to reach their share of participation. This contributes to the one-sided discrimination of women's needs within the party's structure. In so doing, successful CSU women do not only have to accept the unfavorable preconditions for themselves, they also can neither lobby other female candidates nor women's particular interests.

However, there is one major advantage women today have both in the CSU and in many other male dominated organizations: almost every publicly visible institution needs a certain amount of token women. Hence every single interviewee could recall at least one occasion when she was voted into a certain position simply because of her gender. Many of them became the first and only woman to a certain committee, board or even parliament. Even though the CSU is one of the few parties in Germany that strongly opposes quotas, a secret or indirect quota was mentioned frequently. The party statute even proposes to elect one woman to each party committee to represent the female point of views and to claim women's interests. But there is a downside to this advantage as well: As soon as the urgent need for some femininity is fulfilled, there is no space for a second, a third or certainly a fourth female representative. Consequently, there is no appeal for women who already hold a position to support the likes of them since they would only become a rival for the single spot to be filled. To protect their own achievements and to assure further success, CSU women have to calculate the risk. Even if most women in the sample would have wished for stronger support especially from other women, the majority of CSU women will prefer to advance their own career to the detriment of other women.

To make the party more attractive to women it has to adopt several major changes. Currently, women can only participate if they come to an arrangement with the active/consenting party members, even though that means to waive the right for equal participation at eye level with the male party members. Henceforth, the CSU must not continue to hope for the women's willingness to conform themselves to the party's structure and functions. Though the sample shows that there certainly are a number of women who are willing to make the effort, one can only guess what potential numbers of qualified women will avoid involvement because of the daunting conditions and requirements. It needs the joint effort of men and women within the party to make the future engagement more attractive. But maybe not until the CSU becomes less successful among female voters as a result of insufficient representation of women's interests will the party leadership recognize the necessity of an adequate percentage of female policy makers.