True Bavarians
The Volatile Identity Politics of Born Regionalists

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Introduction

Bavaria is a special case in German politics. The state has developed a strong regional identity. And this regional identity finds its political expression not only within the state of Bavaria, but also at the federal level. It would not be surprising if there was a strong political movement for Bavarian autonomy or independence. But the opposite is the case. Bavaria sees itself as a paragon of cultural, educational and economic success in a federal Germany. Bavaria lives the paradox of efficient regional identity politics in a non-secessionist environment. The EU is part of this environment and above all a forum for pursuing Bavarian economic preferences.

Contrary to the misunderstanding in the English language literature (Hepburn 2008; Hepburn 2010: 540; Padgett/Burkett 1986: 114), the present chapter argues that the Bavarian Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU) cannot be identified as 'separatist' or 'autonomist'. Rather, the CSU is a party with a regional base but national ambitions. This forces the party to give priority to the preferences of the Bavarian voter. Otherwise, the party would have no chance to win landslide election victories that are necessary to pass the national five-percent hurdle for elections to the German parliament.

The CSU has an agreement with its Conservative sister party, the Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU), that the latter does not contest general elections in Bavaria, leaving the field clear in favour of the CSU. After an election, the CDU and the CSU always join forces in one parliamentary party in the federal parliament. The CSU's absolute priority of winning regional elections and the Bavarian seats in a general election can lead to conflicts between the political preferences of Bavaria and Conservatives[1] at the national level. At first glance, this may look like a struggle

1 Although Germany does not, as has been noted, have a single 'Conservative' party, the expression the Conservatives ('die Konservativen') is common as a shorthand for the federal CDU/CSU 'double party', which is, in most cases, considered a single force on the German political stage. Hence I will use the capitalised 'Conservatives' to refer to this political grouping.

for autonomy. It is, however, only part of the strategic necessity to put Bavaria first in order to stay involved in national politics. The CSU has to balance regional and national interests, and it has tried several models to organize this interest intermediation. It is beyond doubt, however, that among the strategies chosen, we do not find Bavarian autonomy being given priority over national integration.

There is a widespread myth that what the CSU wants is more autonomy for Bavaria or a greater decentralization of state powers in Germany (Hepburn/Hough 2011: 79). This misunderstanding is nurtured by the party itself and its self-styled role as a champion of federalism. The CSU is, indeed, a separate political entity, but the party's purpose is to perform a role in national and European politics. To secure this role, it uses its regional base. Here it needs to be successful. No matter what the CSU's allies in her conservative sister party want, the CSU will always have only one priority: an absolute majority of seats in the Bavarian parliament. This makes the CSU an awkward partner for Conservatives in the rest of Germany, at least as long as the Bavarian electorate has preferences that differ from those of Germany as a whole. Symbolic gestures directed against 'Berlin politics' may help to close the regional ranks, but should not be misunderstood as an expression of autonomist ambitions. The overarching aim of the CSU is not to strengthen the separate political existence of a Bavarian polity. On the contrary, over the years German federalism has become more centralized and unitary in character with the help and support of the Bavarian government (Sturm 2013a; Sturm 2015).

This chapter is structured as follows: The next section deals with the strategic choices the CSU has to make to balance its two hats as regional and national party without losing its grip on its Bavarian identity. This is followed by a discussion of what the core of Bavarian identity is. And finally, I ask whether Bavarian self-confidence is enough to even allow elements of a regional foreign policy.

The dominant role of the CSU as a multi-level party

The CSU has governed Bavaria for more than 50 years. Over this time, it had an absolute majority of seats in the regional parliament from 1946 to 1950, from 1962 to 2008 and from 2013 to 2018. Exceptions to single-party rule made possible by the parliamentary strength of the CSU were periods when the CSU needed coalition partners to stay in power and to support a CSU head of government. Only for a short period in the post-war years, from 1954 until 1958, was the CSU in opposition. The CSU's long period of undisputed rule in Bavaria made it possible for the party to merge – at least in the eyes of many observers inside and outside Bavaria – Bavarian politics with the party political image of the CSU. Success of the CSU in federal elections and European elections were also essential for the strength of the German Conservatives outside Bavaria. The CSU is therefore bound to have a

tactical relationship to party political identity-building. This is evident in the range of positions the party has recently taken on Europe: from the strongly EU-critical position taken in the 2014 election campaign for the European parliament to fend off competitors on the right (Sturm 2018) to the pro-European turn of 2019, when the CSU hoped to make a CSU EU parliamentarian and chairman of the European People's Party, Manfred Weber, the next President of the EU Commission.

The volatility of CSU identity politics has its counterpoint in the stability of its commitment to Bavaria. The key question for the CSU is how to organize maximum political success in Bavaria. One precondition is that it has no conservative rival in Bavaria. As noted above, from the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949, the CDU and the CSU have agreed not to compete in Bavarian or federal elections. Though under the leadership of Franz Josef Strauss, a CSU politician with national popularity, there were initiatives from outside Bavaria for an all-German CSU, the party leadership hesitated to support this idea. German unification appeared to pose a problem for the CSU, because on paper, the increase in the electorate meant it could become more difficult to pass the five-per cent hurdle for membership in the German parliament at federal elections. The party leadership toyed with the idea of an East German partner, dubbed the DSU. The fear that the CDU would retaliate with a Bavarian branch stopped further efforts. Parties to the right of the CDU have also posed a threat to the dominance of the CSU: the Republikaner in the 1980s and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) today. As in the past, the CSU is now reacting to the challenge from the right by offering voters a manifesto that includes the major demands of such right-wing challenger parties. This may estrange the party from the CDU, as, for example, in recent years on the question of the maximum number of migrants Germany should welcome. However, more importantly for the party, such a strategy helped to solidify the CSU's approval rates. Today the Greens have become the main challenger to CSU dominance in Bavaria. The 'greening' of CSU policies is again following the pattern of stealing your opponent's clothes without consulting the CDU.

The second problem for the party is to find an optimal solution for the management of the party in the capital and in Bavaria. The key here is the best possible allocation of power centres at German and Bavarian level (Kießling 2004; Sturm 2013b). The party has to make two strategic decisions. One is whether the party chairman (no woman has yet held the position) should accept a ministerial post in Berlin (or previously in Bonn) or should the party chairman sit in Munich. A second decision to be made is whether the chairman of the party and the head of the Bavarian government (Ministerpräsident) should be the same person or different people should hold these two jobs. If the Bavarian Ministerpräsident is simultaneously party chairman, the CSU's man or woman in the capital heads the influential CSU Landesgruppe (the group of Bavarian MPs within the joint Conservatives parliamentary party). The Landesgruppe has a right to veto decisions of the CDU/CSU

parliamentary party in the national parliament. The fact that strategic decisions at the federal level are so central to the party's strategic options demonstrates again that the CSU is not a party with an exclusive regional and autonomist focus. Its fabric always combines the national and the regional outlook. Given the choices detailed above, this leaves us with the options listed in table 1.

Table 1: The strategic choices for the CSU in combining Bavarian and national politics

Options	Power centres	Examples
1: The federal option: party led from a position in the national government	Split power centres: party chairman in federal capital (cabinet)/ CSU head of Bavarian government	1962–1978 Franz Josef Strauss/ Alfons Goppel; 1988-1993 Theo Waigel/ Max Streibl; 1994–1998 Theo Waigel/ Edmund Stoiber; 2018–2019 Horst Seehofer/ Markus Söder
2: The all-Bavarian option: party led from Bavaria	Regional power centres: party chairman in Munich/ CSU head of Bavarian government	1946–1949 Josef Müller/Hans Ehard; 2008 Erwin Huber/ Günter Beckstein;
3: The unified Bavarian option: party led by one person in Bavaria	Regional power centre: one person in Munich is both party chairman and Bavarian head of government	1949–1954 Hans Ehard; 1957–1960 Hanns Seidel; 1978–1988 Franz Josef Strauss; 1999–2007 Edmund Stoiber; 2008–2018 Horst Seehofer; 2019– Markus Söder

Source: Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (1995) and my own data.

What is the best strategy for a regional party with national ambitions? History does not tell us. The CSU has tried all three options. Much of the effects of the option chosen depended on personalities, and all three options have advantages and disadvantages. It is, however, obvious that none of these options led to demands for greater autonomy for Bavaria. The challenge for the CSU remained how to continue to be an influential force in national politics while remaining authentically Bavarian and able to win absolute majorities in Bavarian elections. Option 1 seems to offer the most far-reaching degree of nationalization for a regional party. With the party heavyweights Franz-Josef Strauss (defence minister in the cabinet of Konrad Adenauer and finance minister in the cabinet of Kurt-Georg Kiesinger) and Theo Waigel (finance minister in the cabinet of Helmut Kohl) the CSU gained national prominence. This model could only work, however, with a father figure as the head of the regional government in Bavaria. An uncontroversial CSU poli-

tician as Bavarian Ministerpräsident, someone more interested in regional affairs than in the challenges of party politics and with an ability to act as a unifying force within Bavaria while avoiding conflict was able to rely on tradition and historical identities to legitimize CSU dominance in Bavaria. By contrast, the party chairman in the capital represented the party's policies and was willing to take a stand on policy matters. Only the combination of both characters guaranteed electoral success in Bavarian elections. During Alfons Goppel's time in office as Bavarian Ministerpräsident his regional popularity successfully mobilized support for the CSU even though the party chairman was restricted by cabinet discipline when he sought confrontation with the Bonn government. This successful model did not work well when Theo Waigel was chairman of the party. His first partner as Ministerpräsident in Bavaria, Max Streibl, did not succeed in developing a fatherly image as office holder. He eventually lost office because of a corruption scandal. His successor, Edmund Stoiber, tried to consolidate the CSU in Bavaria by provoking conflicts with the party chairman, among other things. As Minister of Finance, Theo Waigel was responsible for the introduction of the Euro. (He even invented its name.) As the Euro was unpopular in Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber attacked the introduction of the Euro and wanted Theo Waigel to resign from the party chair. This conflict illuminates the blame game that is possible if the jobs of party chairman and Ministerpräsident remain separated. The CSU can simultaneously be involved in national government decisions and opposed to these decisions. This blame game can, of course, also be played when options two or three are chosen.

Option 2 is the least attractive for the CSU, because it has no institutionalized role in national politics and is weakened by competing power centres. The party chairman can take part in coalition meetings in the capital if the Conservatives are part of the national government. But he lacks any kind of national electoral appeal that could be added to the influence on voters that comes from the Ministerpräsident.

Option 3, however, empowers the party leader, who is at the same time head of government in Munich. In this role, he can play the game of outsider to the national government and government critic in the name of Bavaria, and, at the same time, if the CSU is in the national coalition, he can intervene in national politics. Strong Ministerpräsidenten present their Bavaria as an example of good government for the whole of Germany. Two of them, Franz Josef Strauss in 1980 and Edmund Stoiber in 2002 even became the Conservative parties' candidate for the office of Federal Chancellor. Again, personality matters. No-one expects the present holder of the office of Ministerpräsident in Bavaria, Markus Söder, to take on a role of comparable significance. His wish to combine the offices of party chairman and Ministerpräsident shows, however, his strategic preferences.

The roots of Bavarian identity politics

Whereas most of the German states (Länder) were reshaped after the Second World War, Bavaria retained its traditional boundaries. Though it is internally divided by regional dialects and historic allegiances, a pan-Bavarian identity developed. At its core are above all certain symbols, traditions and customs, which outsiders, too, see as 'typically' Bavarian. This is a feature of a relatively passive regional culture that generally does not carry a political message, such as the option of separatism (Sturm 2016). Opinion polls show that non-political items are of central importance for Bavarian identity. The most commonly mentioned include: regional costumes and traditional dresses (traditional Bavarian dress such as the Dirndl and Lederhosen), beer and other traditions, followed by Oktoberfest, and the mountains (the Alps), lakes and forests. Of lesser importance, but still worth mentioning, are regional food and the Bayern Munich football club (Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung 2009: 59).

Tom Mannewitz's (2015: 351) comparative empirical research on regional cultures in Germany characterizes Bavaria as libertarian-constitutional. This is the framework in which the dominant cultural identity develops. Mannewitz finds that, for Bavarians, freedom is more important than equality. Social, political and economic competition is supported by 91 percent of the population. Only ten percent of Bavarians give priority to solidarity over competition. There is little or no support for socialist ideas, the welfare state is less popular than in other German Länder. Self-reliance is viewed more positively than a paternalistic state. The public role of the church still enjoys the respect of a much larger segment of regional society than elsewhere in Germany. Support for the constitution, legal procedures and the Federal Constitutional Court are also above average.

The Bavarian cultural identity embedded in this libertarian-constitutional political culture strengthens a feeling of social and cultural identity that is stronger than the proximity felt to Germany or Europe (see table 2). Research has shown (Sturm et al. 2010) that regional identities are based on the circumstances of day-to-day life and face-to-face communication. In Bavaria the difference between 'us' and 'them' originates from assumed emotional proximity, not, however, from political conflict. A dialect, for example, can draw emotional boundaries, yet in the Bavarian context it cannot be used as justification for separatism. Though cultural identity can justify regional self-confidence especially when – as is the case in Bavaria – this can be connected with regional economic success, this self-confidence is reined in by the constraints of Germany's system of interlocking federalism.

Table 2: Regional allegiance in Bavaria (in %)

	very strong	strong	not very strong	none	don't know
Town/village	63	26	7	3	1
Region	59	29	8	3	1
Bavaria	51	37	8	2	2
Germany	40	45	13	2	0
Europe	17	43	28	10	2

Source: Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (2009): Heimatgefühl und Leben in Bayern. Generationenspezifische und regionale Unterschiede von Einstellungen zu Politik und Heimat, München: Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung: 33.

Federalism is less popular in Bavaria than one might expect. German interlocking federalism has managed to transform a system of shared rule and self-rule into a vehicle of constant bargaining behind the scenes. Bavarian citizens tend to see their regional government as an actor which rarely speaks for territorial interests. Unitary federalism implies that most important pieces of legislation originate at the national level. It is generally regional governments and, only occasionally regional parliaments that react to national government initiatives. Regional governments are better placed to register resistance if necessary, because they are represented in the quasi-second chamber of Germany's parliament, the Bundesrat, which has a role in national legislation. Empirical research has shown, however, that political conflict in the Bundesrat is rare, even though parties play a major role in its decision-making process. The Bundesrat is part of the German consensus culture, which easily overcomes party political competition (Finke et al. 2019). Still, on rare occasions territorial and/or financial interests lead to a confrontation with the federal government in the Bundesrat. At least symbolically, and certainly in its political communications, a Bavarian government is bound to defend a 'Bavaria first' logic. In the national context, this is not without problems, because the other Länder may see Bavaria as a wealthy and powerful neighbour with an inclination to dominate.

The International Dimension

The CSU's party political 'Bavaria first' logic finds its expression in the arena of foreign policy, too. Germany's cooperative federalism allows the Länder to pursue their own independent foreign policies. In the past, state governments have mainly

concentrated on efforts to promote regional industries abroad. They see themselves as ambassadors for regional investment, supporting foreign direct investment in their states. In recent years, the Bavarian government has given its parallel foreign policy an explicitly political dimension. In its effort to increase party political support in Bavaria, the CSU has taken foreign policy initiatives that are in conflict with German foreign policy or at least tend to clash with the official position of the German government. For example, there are strong voices in the CSU's leadership that advocate a better relationship with Russia, not least for economic reasons. The then Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer, accompanied by the former Bavarian Prime Minister, Edmund Stoiber, visited Vladimir Putin several times. He supported the end of sanctions against Russia.[2] The Bavarian government shares a critical attitude towards Angela Merkel's refugee policies with Victor Orbán of Hungary. The Bavarian government has established a close relationship with the Visegrád countries and tends to play down democratic deficits in Poland and Hungary. In Bavaria, this disagreement with Berlin over foreign policy is not seen as a problem. It may not be a decisive vote-winning device to insist on these priorities visa-à-vis national politics, but it has the double advantage of securing regional interests (economic ones, and the interest of keeping refugees out) and of demonstrating to the Bavarian voter that the CSU defends Bavarian interests even if this means (low-level) conflict with the national government.

In this respect, the CSU is not immune to regional 'closure'. When this happens, it is usually the result of past experiences. Bavaria had hoped to become part of an institution with veto power within the EU. The Committee of the Regions (CoR) not only lacks this power, it became also increasingly self-centred. Successive Bavarian governments thus considered participation ineffective. As a result, Bavarian governments, though interested in multi-level politics, decided to do it 'their way' (Bocklet 2017). This, however, did not entail a turn towards Euroscepticism. It was more an effort to make the best out of a range of limited options. On the one hand, this meant Bavaria would use all points of access to influence European politics: the federal government, regional cooperation and lobbyism in Brussels. On the other hand, efforts were made to open up European channels for the regional parliament and to give regional parliamentary majorities the means to influence the national government in European affairs.

2 http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/parteien-und-kandidaten/die-csu-und-die-aussenpolitik-wie-horst-seehofer-die-provinzialitaet-abstreifen-will-14918807.html (Schäffer 2017)

Conclusions

Identity politics have a long tradition in Bavaria. For the governing CSU, they are a tool to secure power on the national *and* regional stages. Office-seeking and, as a precondition, vote-seeking, is more important than policy details. The CSU has always been flexible when it came to policy preferences. Policy choices obeyed the logic of power politics. A conflict with the national government and even with the Conservatives in power in the capital was (and is) quite frequent. However, conflict was not used to mobilise support for separatism. Bavaria is not a German Scotland or Catalonia. The CSU sees itself as a national party with regional roots but also has the ambition to play a role in the context of the German national government. The relationship to multi-level governance, including federalism, is tactical within the limits that interlocking federalism draws. True Bavarians never forget where they come from. They like their regional culture and traditions, but see their future in Germany and in the EU. For the CSU, the respect for cultural difference is, above all, a means to guarantee survival in national politics. The Bavarian cultural identity does not need protection; what is far more dangerous for the CSU is that Bavarian economic success, which attracts not only Germans from other regions but all the forces of globalization and migration, makes it harder for the party to claim that the CSU is the only party able to effectively represent Bavarian interests.

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