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The German Elections

Consequences for the SPD

In the middle of the global financial crisis, which has turned out to also be a crisis for neo-liberal ideology, Germany went to the polls. The result was a resounding success for the liberal FDP which came out of the elections stronger than ever before in its 61 year history. It is now in the position to be the junior partner in a coalition government with the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and their Bavarian sister party, the CSU. The electorate's support for the Social Democrats collapsed by 11 percentage points. It was their worst post-war result to date, even lower than the dismal result of 1953 when the SPD got only 28.8 % of the votes. After 11 years in government, the SPD is once again relegated to the opposition benches having to ask itself how this disaster could have happened.

This article will analyse the German elections from the perspective of the Social Democrats: What do the results signify? What were the reasons for the bad performance of the SPD? What were the immediate reactions of the party leadership? What are the conclusions and consequences for the SPD after this election disaster?

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The election results

The elections showed a clear mandate for the centre-right parties, in spite of the fact that Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU also lost votes and with 33.8% (2005: 35.2) only gained a third of all votes. The undisputed winner is the liberal FDP which increased its share of the vote from 9.8% in 2005 to a convincing 14.6%. These results, together with Germany's quirky electoral system of *Überhangmandate* (a detail understood by very few Germans themselves: if a party wins more constituencies in a state than the number of seats it ought to get according to its share of

second votes, it wins these additional so called 'overhang seats') which favours larger parties, has given a coalition between CDU/CSU and FDP a clear majority of 332 out of the 622 seats in the next German *Bundestag*.

On the left of the political spectrum it was also the smaller parties that gained votes. The Left Party won 11.9% (2005: 8.7%), the Greens 10.7% (8.1%). The SPD, on the other hand, tumbled from 34.2% at the last election to 23%. In 2005, the party had an almost equal share of the votes with the CDU/CSU. With less than 10

million voters the SPD fell back by over 10 percentage points, which means a loss of over 6 million votes. In part this was due to a very low turnout. With 70.8% it was even lower than 2005 when 77.7% of the electorate went to the polls.

That a low turnout is traditionally bad for the Social Democrats was again underlined by voters' migration. By far the largest loss of voters was the 2 million who in 2005 voted for the SPD but decided to stay at home this time. Added to this are roughly 500.000 SPD voters lost due to demographic changes (i.e. the number of voters who had died could not be made up by the number of first-time voters). In contrast to the other parties, the SPD lost on balance more voters to the Left Party (more than 1.1 million). Approx. 870.000 moved to the CDU/CSU, 860.000 to the Greens and only 520.000 to the FDP.

The poor performance of the SPD was in particular evident amongst the lower middle and the working classes (in both cases -13%) and white-collar employees (-15%). The loss amongst members of trade unions (13%) and trade union members in working class jobs (16%) was also high. This proves that the SPD has lost the trust of its traditional electorate of skilled workers and white-collar trade unionists.

Reasons for the election losses of the SPD

There is clearly a loss of trust between the majority of Germans who embrace social democratic ideals and the SPD. Opinion polls show that 77 to 85% of voters support the introduction of a minimum wage, yet only 23% voted SPD which made this one of the subjects of its election campaign. 59% are for a nuclear energy

phase-out, which was initiated by the SPD and questioned by CDU/CSU and FDP. A majority is against tuition fees, a majority is for stricter rules for the financial markets, 66% of Germans believe that social fairness is especially important - all these are subjects, which the SPD has represented or at least thought to have represented. The bottom line therefore shows: **Germans believe in social democracy but do not vote for the Social Democrats.**

The SPD's loss of voter support did not just manifest itself during the last legislative period. It can therefore not be blamed on the difficult role the SPD had to play as a junior partner in the grand coalition, although being part of the coalition government produced a rather problematic mixture of a simultaneous government's and opposition's election campaign. The SPD had been losing voters from day one of the 'Red-Green' government under Gerhard Schröder in 1998. That year over 20 million had voted SPD; by 2002, however, that figure had dwindled to 18.5 million, to about 16 million in 2005 and roughly 10 million in 2009. That the number of Social Democratic voters has been halved must be attributed to an increasing loss of trust in SPD policies in Germany.

After the election results of 2009 this breakdown of trust can no longer be dismissed as simply a problem of communication. The problem of communication is inherent in many aspects of SPD policies themselves. This applies especially to the social reform programme 'Agenda 2010'. Apart from the question whether some of these reforms were necessary and fair, the necessity to initiate reforms existed without any doubt. The communication, however, lacked vision and direction. 'Either we modernise or we will be modernised' was the bottom line of a

technocratic policy issued from the top. Not only did it find no resonance among traditional SPD voters, it actually scared many of them off.

Voters do not simply make a rational decision regarding what policies are on offer in the market place. These offers have to be part and parcel of the voters' emotional and cultural references and their moral values. This is especially true when we talk about the working class, which is traditionally associated with the Social Democrats. But David Hume's assertion that 'reason is the slave of emotion', not the other way around, also applies to a new and 'more modern' group of voters.

The former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder understood intuitively that the 'political brain is an emotional brain' when he, at least rhetorically, strongly appealed to Social Democratic values during the election campaign of 2005 and was therefore appreciated by modern-day workers. He achieved this by castigating the social injustice of the CDU's fiscal policies whilst referring again and again to his own humble background.

Such a volte-face did not work in 2009, because the CDU under chancellor Merkel had itself undergone a rhetorical social democratisation process especially since the beginning of the global financial crisis. Merkel was following the example of the 'compassionate conservatism' of David Cameron in the UK and Fredrik Reinfeldt in Sweden.

During the grand coalition, which forced the SPD into painful compromises with the CDU/CSU, both parties showed themselves to be rhetorically 'social democratic' in spite of their ideological differences. Yet neither party

offered a consistent, value based social democratic policy, which was emotionally trustworthy. This credibility gap contributed significantly to the poor election results. The SPD will have to close this gap if it wants to survive in the long term as a 'catch-all' party or as they say in German as *Volkspartei*.

Realignment of the SPD leadership

Immediately after the publication of the election results, the SPD's candidate for the post of German chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, declared that he wanted to remain responsible for the party and would stand for the position as chairman of the parliamentary SPD group. In other words, in spite of the disastrous election results, the foreign minister and vice chancellor of the grand coalition did not throw in the towel. But at the same time he neither demanded overall power within the party, nor did he question Franz Müntefering's leadership of the party.

The next day, criticism of the way the SPD's election campaign had been run was growing within the executive committee of the party. Members demanded changes in regards to the party's policies. Some also wanted a new leadership. There were those who felt that Franz Müntefering as party leader and Frank-Walter Steinmeier as the party's top candidate were in parts responsible for the decline of the SPD. They had both held leading positions in the grand coalition and in the 'Red-Green' government from 1998 to 2005. In view of the election results and the loss of trust there could be no 'carry on as before' for the SPD. After various meetings of the SPD leadership, party leader Müntefering hinted at his willingness to step down at the SPD's party conference in November.

But there are differing views within the various wings of the SPD regarding what brought about the election results and to what degree programme and policies would have to be reviewed and altered. Some saw the SPD's raising of the retirement age from 65 to 67 and the social reforms contained in the Agenda 2010 as the main reasons for the loss of credibility. Others saw the rigorous renunciation of SPD policies during the past 11 years as equally untrustworthy.

Comprehensive changes were initiated in order to close ranks within the party and make it absolutely clear from the start that all fractions of the party are represented within the new leadership. Frank Steinmeier, 53, was elected chairman of the parliamentary SPD group. This was in recognition of his vigorous election campaign and as acceptance of the fact that the right wing of the party would have to be represented through a prominent member of the new leadership.

The former environment minister Sigmar Gabriel will be nominated as party leader at the party conference in November. He represents the right wing of the party but has shown in the past that he can act independently. He has a good grasp of the mood within the SPD and the electorate. Aged 50, he is part of the new generation of Social Democrats who will be responsible for the policies of the coming years. He is also accepted as the greatest rhetorical talent within the party.

With Andrea Nahles, the party has for the first time nominated a woman for the post of general secretary. This post is primarily concerned with the running of the party machinery, but can also wield political influence depending on who holds this post. Nahles is 39 years old, clearly much

younger than Steinmeier or Gabriel. In the 1990s she was leader of the *Jusos* (Young Socialists). Later she was for many years a sort of figure head of the left wing of the party. Since 2007 she has been deputy chairperson, without having totally abandoned her left wing beliefs.

The leadership trio of Gabriel, Nahles and Steinmeier is complemented by four deputy chairpersons, representing more or less the centre of the party. They are the former employment minister Olaf Scholz, 51. He has not only got his eyes on the position of deputy chairman, he is also a candidate as Steinmeier's deputy within the parliamentary party, as well as for the leadership of the SPD in Hamburg. It is expected that he will play a vital role in the party.

Hannelore Kraft, 48 is chairperson in Nordrhein-Westfalen (North Rhine-Westphalia), the largest party of the SPD on state level, which will be have state elections next year. Manuela Schwesig, Minister for Social Affairs in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), was noted for her talents during the election campaign. She is 35 years old and together with Nahles represents a generation of younger women. She is the only representative from East Germany within the new SPD party leadership. Klaus Wowereit, 56, is governing mayor of Berlin. He represents the left wing of the federal party and recommends a coalition with the Left Party, although he pushed through drastic cuts in public spending in Berlin against strong opposition from the trade unions.

Challenges to be met by the SPD

Personnel questions were quickly solved by nominating the candidates for a new party lead-

ership. Now the far more complicated questions of party policies and the future organisation of the party have to be tackled in order to consolidate and strengthen the SPD.

It is very important at this stage that the SPD does not make the mistake of wasting its energy by concentrating on power options and the relations with other parties. The party did lose some votes by declaring categorically before the elections that it will not co-operate with the Left Party of former SPD- chairman Oskar Lafontaine. Yet at the same time it is questionable whether opting for the opposite would have produced a better result.

In one respect the situation of the SPD is fundamentally different from that of the CDU/CSU. 70% of all CDU/CSU voters showed a clear preference for a coalition with the FDP, whilst as many as 87% of FDP voters favoured this coalition. We can therefore assume that it was this fact that contributed to the relative strength of the FDP compared to the CDU/CSU. In fact some CDU sympathisers will have voted FDP to make sure that their dream coalition would come true. Contrary to this, SPD voters were split on their 'ideal' coalition. 33% wanted the grand coalition to continue, 32% wanted a coalition with the Greens and the FDP and 26% a coalition with the Greens and the Left Party. This shows that the SPD will not be more successful by opting for a specific coalition. Instead it should (re)develop its own powerful policies and communicate to the electorate what the SPD stands for. In other words it has to close the credibility gap with potential voters.

It is also important that the SPD must not limit its analysis of the past election to the question to which party it lost voters and which adjustments have to be made to win those voters

back. This would be an almost impossible task anyhow, since the SPD lost voters all around. It would also mean that the SPD would define its political position via a market gap. In other words the party would be wedged in between the CDU/CSU on the one side and the Left Party on the other.

The question should be what do the voters who left the party and those who remained have in common? When Germans are asked whether they prefer to live in a society in which performance and efficiency have got priority or whether they'd rather opt for a society where solidarity comes first, 59 per cent tend to opt for solidarity and 31 percent for performance. Voters of CDU/CSU and FDP were split down the middle, whilst 70% SPD sympathisers opted for solidarity. As many as 70% of undecided voters asked one week before polling day opted for solidarity. The question that unites potential Social Democratic voters is the belief that the SPD stands for a fair and united society.

The SPD therefore has to get across to the electorate that it represents a society that stands for social justice, the equality of its people and equal opportunity for all. Performance and a share in prosperity have to be evenly distributed within a society, in which policies are implemented that reduce social inequalities. Most importantly, the SPD as a whole will have to convey the policy of fairness convincingly and with passion.

The political competence of the SPD will have to be based on the concept of a 'fairer society' as paramount to Social Democratic identity: economic competence, which is not simply an attitude, but a reflection of an overall economic point of view. It has to convey that it represents

convincing educational and social policies which show that the party is aware of the problems of the electorate and will offer equal opportunities to all. It has to demonstrate its skills as a party of the working people, founded on the principles of fairness.

These skills form the base of a successful parliamentary opposition. It will not be the rhetorical quality of its MPs, which will bring back voters to the SPD, but better policies and more convincing ideas.

The party conference from 13th to 15th November in Dresden must be the starting signal for such opposition policies. In spite of the urgent need for internal discussions, the SPD must be careful not to concentrate too much on itself. It must quickly adopt the role of an efficient opposition in the *Bundestag*. The party must put pressure on the government, not only in parliament but also outside. A close relationship between the party as a whole and the parliamentary group is absolutely essential. It is equally important that this co-operation works on an equal basis and does not allow for the personal vanities of prominent party members.

The party conference will also have to be the starting signal for the return to a 'catch-all' party, the traditional *Volkspartei*. It will have to permit open discussions. The SPD can look back with pride on its 11 years in government, but it has to be prepared to be critical about its own role where necessary. The party must also be willing to open itself up to a stronger public debate than before and to interact with other social groups like trade unions, non-governmental organisations and environmental groups. The party will need the conviction and the power to lead these debates.

Most of all, the SPD will need a strategy that will help it to become again a German opinion leader in the medium term. The democratic left will need a central debate in the same way in which the predominant cycle of economic liberalism cannot be understood without the central discourse 'private enterprise versus state ownership'. To develop and to implement this will be the dominant challenge for the SPD in the coming years.

*** The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the party.**

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