The Future of the SPD as a Catch-all party

THOMAS MEYER, WOLFGANG MERKEL, CHRISTINA SCHILDMANN, WOLFGANG JÜTTNER AND JULIAN NIDA-RÜMELIN
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■ The SPD remains what it has been and wishes to be ever since the Godesberg Programme of 1959, a left-of-centre catch-all party. Firmly anchored in its basic values of freedom, justice and solidarity, party politics roots its public debates in those principles to achieve an understanding of the common good. In a special way, it incorporates the interests of the productive and innovative middle classes, workers and the socially disadvantaged.

■ For a fairly long time, all over Europe, the major catch-all parties have been weakening, while smaller, predominantly single-issue parties have become stronger. In order to regain size and influence, the SPD today needs a more distinctive programmatic profile, a greater readiness to fight for political alternatives and party reform, which enables greater participation of the younger generation. Also, there is a need for a credible strategy for attaining political power rooted in its basic values. The SPD must be able to make a plausible case for its claim to govern. For that purpose it needs broader social coalitions.

■ Even in the altered social circumstances of the present time, social democracy is about credible programmatic alliances between the middle classes committed to solidarity on the one hand and the milieu of the workers and the disadvantaged in society on the other. The ideals of a fair society and of a new progress are suitable to hold together these social milieus and classes programmatically.

Content

1. Role and Tasks of a Catch-all party[1]

Catch-all parties, organised democratically and embedded in civil society, are vital to democracy. Of all political organisations they play a key role in the political system and political processes, for two reasons:

Only they are able to take on the task of working out a political programme of compromise for society as a whole bridging diverging social interests and values, civil society initiatives and associations. Catch-all parties make it possible to develop, in the course of political debate, a viable conception of the common good because they aim to appeal to many voters. Multiple social values and interests find expression in such parties. This task of integration is vital for democracy. Catch-all parties must constantly measure themselves against this claim.

2. In principle, all parliamentary parties are important, but first and foremost the catch-all parties are the key actors in the process of mediating between social interests and public action. Only political parties are both embedded in the political life of civil society and represented in state institutions, parliaments and governments, in which policy action programmes can be mandatorily put into force. Only the larger parties, whether in the opposition or in the government, are able – to a greater or lesser extent and in different roles – to realise politically what society demands and aspires to.

Naturally, the better political parties perform these functions of political integration and control, the more democratic their internal organisation is. Internal party democracy and consistent action are not contradictory. If decision-making processes inside a party are organised democratically, party members are more motivated to confidently represent mutually taken decisions externally. This also gives such decisions extraparliamentary viability. Leadership and democracy are not contradictory: good leadership integrates a range of positions in a form that can be endorsed and does not seek to evade the scrutiny of members and grassroots party bodies. Mere allegiance parties with a passive party organisation that passively follows a charismatic leader, supported and protected by small pressure groups and imposing a political line from the top down are scarcely able to strike diverse and deep

roots in society. In this sense, they can never become catch-all parties.

Catch-all parties best serve democratic integration and mediation between politics and society when they are open. This means open to people of different views and social origins, as long as they are willing to support the party's principles and political aims. It makes them open to society and open internally. To the extent that the major parties are closed off, either ideologically, regionally or socially, the establishment of small opposing parties directed only towards single political goals could seem to be the only solution on the part of those whose interests are excluded. The party system thus tends to polarise and splinter. A stable democracy thus needs open catch-all parties.

Disagreements, conflicts, differences of opinion and interest in people and issues can increase the effectiveness of political parties by strengthening their social integration and political power. This is the case as long as their inner structures allow fair integration and consideration of different positions. Only if parties are set up for integration and a fair balance of interests internally can the open settlement of disagreements increase their integration power and external appeal. Parties must connect the interests of their members with a broad spectrum of social interests and views. This must be done on the basis of particularly strong core values. Catch-all parties, especially the SPD, should not succumb to the temptation to take all social interests into equal consideration. They must never lose sight of their starting point, interests of workers, the lower classes and those parts of the middle classes committed to solidarity, above all in the modern sector – in technical, social, creative, cultural and ICT occupations – in debates and negotiations on a majority-oriented understanding of the common good. This also contributes to the formation of a clearer profile, which builds trust.

A catch-all party should display the following characteristics:

■ representation in its membership, even if asymmetrical, of people from all social strata;

■ a strong appeal to voters from all social strata;

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1. This paper has been originally developed as a position paper by the Basic Values Commission of the SPD National Executive.

■ a distinctive party platform with a conception of the common good based on the party's core values;

■ and above all, the aspiration to win its own political electoral majority or at least to be able to form a two-party coalition as the leading government party.

But this should not conflict with the SPD's focus on its main interest and values. This consists in the goal of equal freedom for all, especially with regard to the social and material conditions of freedom. This is the centre of gravity of all the SPD's efforts as a catch-all party in respect of integration and public welfare. Indeed, the SPD has always understood itself in this way. Hitherto, this meant that it was always able to obtain over 40 per cent of the national vote. However, it is likely that, at least for the foreseeable future, this expectation, which was decisive with regard to the party's strategic and coalition-forming options, is not achievable.

2. The Weakening of Catch-all Parties

2.1 Erosive Factors

2.1.1 Social Framework

Within the realm of political competition the socio-economic conditions of welfare state policy have also changed. The internationalisation of capital and the economy are putting national-level social and employment policy under sustained pressure. In particular, the flexibilisation of the labour market to ensure international competitiveness and the erosion of socially insured employment are experienced as a unilateral renunciation by the government of the welfare state consensus between catch-all parties and voters. The scope for redistribution of an expansive welfare state and the policy of state intervention, which formed the basis of the political and social integration of all social strata from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s by means of participation in growing social wealth no longer exists and has given way to flexible, often precarious career paths. The cuts in social services heightened the impression of a unilateral rejection of the welfare state consensus on the part of catch-all parties.

The organisational structures of catch-all parties are aimed essentially at the integration of an industrialised society. The organisational forms of catch-all parties, despite numerous attempts at reform, are now out of step with the forms of working and living characteristic of a contemporary service-based society, with its individualised and flexibilised life courses.

The increased immigration resulting from ongoing globalisation and European integration not only brings about an increasingly multifarious electorate and social interests, but also gives a boost to political parties that focus on ethno-national identities. The success of right-wing populist parties is also a consequence of the carelessness with which the catch-all parties have addressed the issues of immigration and integration. In Germany, reunification created a mental and social conflict with regard to equal treatment: the failure to resolve this eroded the credibility of the catch-all parties' promises of reconstruction in eastern Germany.

The disintegration of traditional social and moral milieus from the end of the 1960s as a result of advancing secularisation, changing occupational structures in the wake of the expansion of educational opportunities and the emergence of the »service economy«, as well as the formation of new lines of conflict have broken up the catch-all parties' traditional core electorates. What formerly gave rise to almost automatic support for the catch-all parties particularly from particular socio-moral milieus today must be achieved through communication of issues capable of mobilising the voters. At the same time, the inability of the catch-all parties to mobilise the electorate is increasing.

The reluctance with which national parties in Europe took up the issues of environmental protection and sustainability, energy and transport opened up a representation gap which Europe's various green parties, initially highly ideologised, were able to capitalise on, thereby establishing themselves on the political scene. By European comparison, social democratic parties have not tackled especially environmental issues to anything like the same extent.

The interplay between changes in the conditions of political competition with changing values and the erosion of traditional milieus has resulted in a reorientation of the voters. Diminishing party loyalties are making it easier for the new middle classes to vigorously change their party preferences. The growing political centre, which

lacks party affiliations, together with shrinking core electorates, is making it more difficult for catch-all parties to mobilise support. At the same time, the ascent of small parties shows the growing variety of interests in society, whom the catch-all parties are no longer able to integrate and represent. Up until the early 1960s, Germans in particular found themselves in a de-politicised and de-ideologised »post-totalitarian state of exhaustion« which made it easier for the catch-all parties to successfully carry out political integration. Since then, individualisation and changing values have fostered the emergence of civil society associations which make possible more direct and more effective representation of political interests in addition to and in part instead of, the political parties.

2.1.2 Parties' Reluctance to Change

The dwindling membership affecting all political parties in Europe is also a consequence of outdated membership models. Tedious party work without interludes of more enjoyable experiences and successes in a mass media society no longer appeals to many people, especially the youth. At the same time, the advance of the mass media has caused a personalisation and centralisation of political decision-making in the catch-all parties. Participation in political parties appears for many people not only to be boring, but also, given the exclusion of the grassroots from participation in decision-making, pointless.

Every party conveys its political offer by its core brand – in other words, a political core competence with which it is associated, from which it derives its identity and on account of which people vote for it. Catch-all parties need to be »market leaders« in their core brand. Supplemented by secondary competences that make it possible to address a diverse electorate, a margin of acceptability arises which may leave a party at the risk of substantial losses. The core brand »social justice«, with which the SPD positioned itself unambiguously in conflicts concerning the welfare state was tarnished somewhat by the »Third Way« and »Agenda 2010« – even though »objectively« this development does not always seem justified. The same applies to all other European social democratic parties. Since taking power in 1998 the SPD has found itself in a persistent identity and confidence crisis. Furthermore, the CDU and the CSU developed their »market leadership« in the economic domain with welfare state interventions during the global economic crisis, although

on the other hand their increasing acceptance of modern ways of life have alienated conservative voters.

The »Third Way« of European social democracy was aimed at winning votes above all from the political centre. As a result, core electorates of the social democratic parties lost relevance for the party. The representation gap that ensued was exploited by newly formed, highly ideologised parties on the left, which captured the attitudes of the traditional working class and other under-privileged groups. In Germany, it was »Die Linke« (»the Left«), with the active assistance of the parts of the trade union movement which had become estranged from the Social Democratic Party.

The continuing decline of catch-all parties and in particular of social democratic parties in Europe is by no means only a German phenomenon. It is accompanied by a change in party systems from two-party dominance to pluralism in which the major parties are now barely able to gather 60 per cent of the votes. With five parties represented in the Bundestag, firmly established country-wide, the conditions of political competition have changed forever to the lasting benefit of the smaller parties. Today, the SPD, as a catch-all party, is in competition with smaller parties, in the form of Die Linke and the Greens, both at the level of its core competence and at the level of secondary competences. Alienation from the Social Democratic party benefits these »smaller« parties. The Christian Democrats have no such problem arising from competition.

2.2 Reasons for Inertia

Changing values, modernisation and individualisation have fused the traditional milieus, but they have not completely dissolved them. In particular, post-materialist lifestyles are a phenomenon affecting the top 30 to 40 per cent of the population, but also the highly educated and those seeking advancement through education who originate in the traditional social democratic milieus and who do not aspire to middle class or »bourgeois« status. The lower strata continue to experience a deterioration of their material and social circumstances. The losses of the catch-all parties stem from the loss and estrangement of this strata of the electorate. The reorientation to the political centre via the »Third Way« and the doubts arising due to the Agenda policy about its core brand of

»social justice« are the decisive factors responsible for the Social Democratic Party's declining vote since 1998. The future of social democracy depends on how it deals with the conflicts of interest inherent in the service society and whether it manages to incorporate globalisation as a field of social democratic politics and action.

Catch-all parties have a highly diverse and only »loosely connected« organisational structure that allows for the simultaneity of different organisational rationalities. In some circumstances it would be possible to create an union based on a member-oriented mass integration party with the features of a »voters party« that would be managed by elites. It is also necessary, because many people – especially those who take interest in politics – do not form their political opinions merely in response to the media, but through interactions in their social life-world. In such unions, active, well-informed and committed party members and the arguments they can muster would be needed. Analyses of British catch-all parties show that although professionalised, centralised and media driven election campaigns managed to win over a wide range of voter demographics, traditional mobilisation campaigns via local party members have proved to be a more effective vote-winning strategy.

In the meantime, Left-wing parties are found in almost every European country and in Germany there is *Die Linke*, which at present does not play an insignificant role in either eastern or western *Länder*. Its presence in the party landscape is not to be underestimated. As the previous years have shown, the less the catch-all parties seem capable of convincingly solving the major problems, the bigger the smaller parties will become. The weakness of catch-all party strengthens the smaller parties.

3. Weaknesses of Catch-all Parties: Problems for Democracy

Comprehensive representation of political interests is less and less provided by the catch-all parties alone. In particular, the environmentally oriented and left-wing socialist parties may prove to be a permanent force in political contestation, filling the representation gap left by the catch-all parties. At first glance, this may appear to benefit democracy from a theoretical standpoint. However, in contrast to the traditional catch-all party model, integration must now take place outside the party, namely

between parties. But integration of this kind no longer follows the rules of a bureaucratic and solidaristic pursuit of a compromise and consensus of a considerable binding force, but rather those of a party competition. This has consequences for coherent policy formation and the sustainability (also the »projected period of decay«, somewhat loosely referred to as the »half-life«) of such policy, given the pressures of party competition. One inevitable outcome of the increasing number of government coalition partners is a rise in the cost of political decision-making. Democratic governance is becoming more unstable, inefficient and susceptible to obstruction.

Larger coalition formats reduce the transparency of political decisions. The decline in the significance of catch-all parties will, over the long term, reduce the possibility of clear attribution of the decisions taken by democratic governments to the participating parties. This was one advantage of majority-based democracies over the consensus-based democracies. It is possible to keep track of decision-making in a two-party government; in a three-party government, however, opacity begins to creep in. Germany in particular is entering into unknown territory at the national level.

In the second half of the twentieth century, catch-all parties were a force for integration which is not to be underestimated, not only at the political level but also in the social sphere. To the extent that they brought together and represented different social strata, socio-moral milieus, ethnic groups and religions in their membership and electorates they imposed cohesion on these »groups« in society as a whole. In this way, catch-all parties also built up social capital and trust within society. They built bridges between different social groups. If the different strata, value-communities, ethnic groups and so on are to be represented by several small parties that are competing with one another, competition and distrust will grow among these »groups« at the level of society. Just as political integration had a positive effect on societal integration, so the increasingly diversifying political party competition will deepen the rifts between social groups.

Political parties for reasons of competition have significant incentives to set social groups in opposition to one another in order to be able to mobilise them as voters. This is occurring in Germany, for example, between Die Linke, the SPD and the Liberals (with regard to social classes) and in many other countries between right-wing

populists and more multiculturally inclined parties (with regard to ethnic groups and religions). In a situation in which competition is intensifying along these lines it would be a perfectly rational party strategy to concentrate more and more on particular strata, groups and electorates, while allowing the common good and social cohesion to fall by the wayside. As a result, the cement of society will continue to crumble and social fragmentation worsen.

4. No Impact without a Realistic Prospect of Power

Political parties are not primarily encounter groups they want and ought to make a difference. This is more difficult for catch-all parties than for clientelistic parties because their appeal must be based emphatically on the common good – they cannot limit themselves to individual issues. This requires a policy profile in the form of a party platform and an election manifesto. Catch-all parties in particular must clearly stand for a policy and practical continuity: short-term, unannounced policy »adjustments« make party policy less credible. In our media dominated world it is becoming more and more important that policy claims, practical competence and social integrity are communicated via personal appeal: all key policy areas need the right face – otherwise, all the hard work put into them will be in vain.

One of the principal conditions of political consensus is a credible potential for power. Society's increasing heterogeneity and the ending of the special status of the German party system after reunification, have led over the past 20 years to the increasing Europeanisation of the German party landscape. Our customised system of proportional representation will probably lead to normalisation of the five-party system in parliament. The over 40 per cent share of votes for a single party have become an absolute exception; »grand coalitions« do not even represent the majority of the population; coalition-building is becoming more and more difficult; and three-party coalitions are becoming the norm. Citizens' interests will, in the future, be increasingly articulated outside the party landscape. That may be cause for regret, but there is nothing we can do to prevent it. This will significantly change the everyday culture of politics, something which is already visible in other European countries. We have to get to grips with it.

The consequences of this for the SPD include the following:

1. Without renouncing its claim to be catch-all-party, the SPD must become more partisan and recognised primarily as such, as the party of modern workers, as well as of the ordinary self-employed and one which seeks to link together social justice, achievement and equality of opportunity; to balance private initiative and public welfare; and also to guarantee social participation and security for all as civil rights. Social justice, achievement and participation: these are the yardsticks of Social Democratic policy.

2. The SPD must do even more to be the party in which the relevant social issues are debated. Although our party programme provides an apparatus for assessing social questions, we do not presume to have all the answers. First and foremost, let us remove the phrase »there is no alternative« from our vocabulary! Modern media society has to learn that social debate and arguments over the best solutions must be the key element of democratic culture.

3. Politics in the future will continue to be structured on the basis of political parties. This happens even more so if the overwhelming majority of people feel comfortable with the party system and the parties refrain from pursuing dominance or a monopoly over political representation.

4. Elections are known to be more than just political snapshots. They confer power for a period of time. The changed framework demands different ways of acting, both in the run-up to elections and in their aftermath.

In the run-up, negative utterances about one's intentions with regard to coalition formation are to be avoided, if possible. They limit one's options with regard to the acquisition of power, restrict one's scope for negotiations after the election and call into question one's credibility if one has to go back on one's word later on. A position must be maintained despite massive media. The aim is not formation of a specific coalition but the acquisition of influence via good election results, which should ensure a decisive role in the government in the next election period. This is so regardless of the comparatively large policy overlap with the Green Party.

In the aftermath, even if a coalition is formed without dispute and coalition negotiations are assured, no conclusions can be drawn about the quality of government actions, as proved by the CDU/CSU/FDP since they came to power. Coalition negotiations become more prolonged in the wake of election results. We must learn to cope with instability, to accept minority governments and to develop different ways of dealing with everyday political matters and different ways of reaching consensus (strengthening parliament against the executive).

5. Social Alliances

5.1 The Social Embedding of the SPD

Whether a party can claim to be a catch-all party also depends on how hard it tries to perform its function of reaching and connecting the various social milieus and trends. This raises the question of which social groups exist in Germany, where they are situated politically and which groups the SPD is actually able to reach. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's 2006 study »Society in the Process of Reform« provides a number of important clues. It divides up the German population into political milieus whose members resemble one another with regard to material circumstances, value orientations and political expectations.

5.2 Brief Overview of Political Milieus

The *Achievement-oriented individualists* (11 per cent) largely comprise the core milieu of economic liberalism. The *Established highfliers* (15 per cent) represent primarily the provincial and (liberal) conservative milieu. They are strongly achievement-oriented and are conscious of themselves as an elite.

The *Critical educated elites* (9 per cent) represent by far the most left-wing, youngest and at the same time most highly qualified group. Well-qualified employees, higher level civil servants and freelance academics have above average representation in this group.

The *Committed middle class* (10 per cent) is a red-green core milieu, which has developed over a long period, although a minority of them lean towards voting for centre-right parties.

The *Contented climbers* (13 per cent) stand for modern achievement-oriented employees in the centre. In their own opinion they have acquired high status through their own efforts.

The *Endangered middle* (16 per cent) represents the predominantly (provincial) urban and industrial workers and thus the »more traditional« Social Democratic core mi-

Table 1: Loyalty to the SPD by political type

	Voting preference	Limited potential	Considerable potential	Overall potential
Committed middle class	33	7	8	48
Authority-oriented low-qualified	30	9	6	45
Critical educated elites	29	6	7	42
Stolid traditionalists	26	9	6	41
Endangered middle	23	7	10	40
Dependent precariat	16	12	9	37
Contented climbers	25	6	4	35
Achievement-oriented individualists	18	8	8	34
Established high fliers	14	6	7	27

Source: SPD Party Executive 2007.

lieu. The *Stolid traditionalists* (11 per cent) is the group which is most strongly oriented towards the two main catch-all parties. It has the largest proportion of people with a basic education, people over 60 and women.

The *Authority-oriented low-qualified* (7 per cent), mainly from modest backgrounds, have managed to advance themselves, at least on a modest scale. The proportion of unskilled workers, as well as ordinary workers and salaried employees is above average.

The *Dependent* (or »left behind«) *precariat* (8 per cent) is characterised by social exclusion and loss of social status. This group has a high proportion of age groups in active employment, the highest proportion of unemployed and is dominated by eastern Germans and males.

It is clear that, despite the number of times the catch-all party SPD has been written off, it has a potential for catching voters across the whole social spectrum. The main focus are the left-liberal milieus of the Committed middle classes and the Critical educated elites, on the one hand and the workers' milieus (Authority-oriented low-qualified, Stolid traditionalists, Endangered middle), on the other. The main focus are left-liberal milieus, but the SPD is represented with a critical mass among all the milieus. This can no longer be said of the CDU/CSU across the board and certainly not of the other parties. It is also evident, however, that the SPD is at present not maximising its mobilisation potential in the milieus of the Critical educated elite, the Committed middle class and the Endangered middle.

The situation in eastern Germany is special. After massive de-industrialisation, few economic centres have emerged there to date that are closely integrated in the international division of labour. This has led to sharp disparities between regions, but also between the old and young generations of workers. In the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study, this peculiarity is reflected within the workforce: the milieus which are stronger in western Germany are the Achievement-oriented individualists (15 per cent) and the Dependent precariat (25 per cent) are juxtaposed to the milieu of the Endangered middle (18 per cent) which is just as strong in western Germany.

This development partly explains a political peculiarity: among the new »arrivals« and those »left behind« the CDU, the SPD and Die Linke are represented almost equally, the CDU being stronger among the Achievement-oriented individualists and Die Linke stronger among the Dependent precariat. At least in the medium term, Die Linke will have the advantage over the SPD and the CDU in being better able to profit from the profile it acquired in the 1990s as the »eastern party« because of the continuing social divide between east and west (income, wealth, representation). Thus, it will also remain a mix between a regional party and a protest party, also because it is still deeply embedded in civil society structures in eastern Germany.

The newly founded Social Democratic Party in 1989 was the first of the new opposition movements to stand up against the SED's claim to total power by disputing its forced annexation of the SPD's legacy. Emerging as they did from the peace and emancipation movements in the DDR, eastern German Social Democrats in the main were no longer anchored in the traditions and organisations of the labour movement. This alienation has been only partly resolved over the past two decades, also despite expectations of a renaissance of the party in its former strongholds.

5.3 Political Integration

If the SPD wishes to renew itself as a left-wing catch-all party it must be able once more to do what it managed to achieve in good times: to forge an alliance between skilled workers/white-collar workers and the enlightened, solidaristic middle class. This concerns much more than merely a strategy for winning a majority. What is at issue is a quintessential task of the SPD, its very legitimacy as a left-wing catch-all party.

The great challenge facing the SPD as a catch-all party is to build bridges between different milieus with diverse life situations and needs which are now moving further and further apart, not arbitrarily but in a clear-cut and distinctive manner. That is only apparently contradictory because what is distinctive about the party is its clear canon of values, which enables it to integrate different milieus. But for that purpose these values must be clearly discernible and all individual claims must refer to them. What is needed, therefore, is not a formulation of a »special offer« for each milieu and each target group, but in the course of a debate to link the individual claims of different groups on the basis of compelling basic val-

ues. The big-city graduate and the small-town apprentice carpenter will not come together on their own: what is needed is a debate, a common effort to determine what is »good« for society.

»Prosperity and freedom through smaller government« was the key promise of the neoliberals in recent decades. The SPD must be in a position to conduct its own debate on how public welfare is to be achieved as an alternative to the discourse of those conservative forces whose aim is to set different milieus and strata against one another, as can be observed, for example, in the conflict staged both in the media and in the political realm between tax payers and benefit recipients. One might mention in this regard the rhetoric of the prophets of a »new bourgeoisie« and its transposition into everyday political debate (»late Roman decadence«).

A social democratic discourse, which renews and strengthens old alliances and gives rise to new ones, must be clearly distinguished from its political opponents. It must be clear what values our politics is based on. What do we stand for and what alternative are we offering? That is the emotional basis for an alliance – only in this way are identification and mobilisation possible. Conflict is an indispensible part of politics – consensus comes at the end of a negotiation process, not at the beginning.

If the SPD is to remain a catch-all party it is necessary – but not sufficient – for it to gather up disillusioned SPD voters who have withdrawn to the sidelines and to recapture milieus open to the SPD that have migrated to the Greens or Die Linke. The party also needs to »outshine« the opposing camp. Needless to say, as far as alliance-building is concerned it cannot mean falling into line with the opponent's positions and adopting his rhetoric and ideas. This would serve only to strengthen conservative paradigms, playing into the hands of political opponents. Most people entertain contradictory paradigms in their heads; the same goes for different social milieus. The goal of social democratic communication must be to activate progressive and community-oriented patterns in people's minds and to awaken their political passion. This is even true for those post-materialists and winners of the educational reforms of the 1970s, which have now changed camps and are on the point of rejecting solidarity. They have to be reminded of their values and prevented from embracing the »disdain for the precariat« characteristic of the new bourgeoisie.

5.4 Anchoring of the New Political Generation

As a catch-all party of the future, the SPD must also be a catch-all party for the young generation. At present, however, it is a long way from achieving this, at least quantitatively. For example, only 18 per cent of women between the ages of 18 and 24 voted for the SPD in the 2009 general elections. In order to reach the young generation once again the SPD must learn to speak a language it understands. It has to find out what makes the young generation tick.

The young generation is considered to be apolitical; but it is more accurate to say that it is distanced from the political parties. Young women between the ages of 18 and 25 are the group with the lowest party loyalty in Germany: only 14.7 per cent feel a close tie to a particular party. Among young men the situation is not much better. Loyalty to a political orientation and party affiliation is no longer passed on automatically; the major part of the young generation has no political home arising from the milieu in which it grew up – furthermore, it isn't even looking for one. In tandem with that, the young generation is pervaded by a strong disdain for political parties and politicians and a keen distrust of the »political system«. But this is nothing new: the divide between the political parties and the »political system«, on the one hand and young people, on the other, has been growing for at least two decades and it has now become quite wide.

According to the Shell Youth Study 2010 at least 17 per cent of young people aged 12 to 25 could imagine becoming active in a political party or political organisation. Only 8 per cent cannot imagine even becoming politically active. However, only 2 per cent admit that they are politically involved in political parties. First and foremost, this gap has to be closed and the party organisation transformed in such a way that a party membership becomes a reality, not merely a theoretical possibility. The new political generation are not likely to adapt themselves to political parties' traditional ways of doing things: parties must therefore make more effort to adapt themselves to the new political generation. The SPD must become more open, less dogmatic, less hierarchical, but also less male-oriented. This applies in particular to young women: it is among them that the discrepancy between a willingness to become politically active and actual party member-

ship is the greatest. In order to win over women to vote for the SPD or to become active members the SPD must touch the issues which concern them in their everyday lives. They must be taken up convincingly and in detail, which includes education, the labour market and family policy. Women must also be made visible as representatives of Social Democratic policies and as recognised as its models.

Equally important, however, are the 83 per cent who at the moment cannot imagine becoming members of any political party. It is one of the SPD's main tasks as a catch-all party to build bridges to this group – but in the first instance not with a view to getting them to join the party. The young generation is not in search of a political home or an all-inclusive worldview. Although young people tend to classify themselves as »inclining to the left« for them this is more a question of lifestyle or self-expression than automatic assent to a set of determinate positions. If the SPD as a catch-all party wants to play a role in the political activities of young people again, it must accept that young people will commit only part of their identity and will show their support for only part of the goals of the party.

Nevertheless, after a period of depoliticisation, once again a growing number of young people are ready to commit themselves; they are sporadically active in relation to specific issues or at least, in principle, ready for action (see Shell Youth Study 2010). An example of this are the college protests in the wake of the Bologna process as well as the diverse activities within the framework of the G8 summits, from Seattle in 1999 up to Heiligendamm in 2007 and beyond. Characteristic of these activities is the coming together in a loose organisational structure of extremely diverse groups and individuals with different needs and focuses, who reach agreement on a common goal and in this way are in a position to put issues on the media and political agendas. For example, before the G8 protests began, only few experts took any interest in organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, but since Seattle international organisations have returned to the political debate.

A left-wing catch-all party must understand and accept the character of the new political generation and make itself available as a partner on certain issues (with the emphasis on the word »partner«). Such alliances do not involve mergers but mutual reinforcement between party

and social movements. A left-wing catch-all party must be in a position to recognise and support an emerging political »movement«, as long as there is a connection to its own set of values, to connect and publicise particular demands, to give them access into the realm of policy implementation and legislation. This enables the party to exercise its main strength, namely its ability to actually push demands through.

Alliances therefore have to be assembled around specific demands if the party is once again to become a leader (instead of leaving it to organisations such as Campact to organise and articulate protest and the need for change. The key to all this is letting people have a say – participation. The young generation does not want to be spoon-fed political slogans; it doesn't want to be the passive recipient of political campaigns, but to be part of them. They have little interest in debates on basic principles: politics needs to be concrete, arising out of their everyday experience. As a members party the SPD must also be an interactive party. Therefore, it needs to be open to new ideas and issues – and be willing to surrender a certain amount of control. A party willing to risk such an opening up needs a firm foundation in values in order to retain its identity and to continue to be a political home for its members who represent the most important asset of a catch-all party.

The young generation is the first generation of so-called »digital natives«: for them, the Internet is a natural habitat. It is a marketplace of ideas and a catch-all party, simply, must have a web presence. Young people behave on the Internet in the same way as they do elsewhere: in other words, they also shun political parties as institutions – and that means their websites, too. Two things arise from this. First, in order to reach the young generation the SPD as a catch-all party must venture into the places where young people have their meeting places, in other words, social networks and forums. But they cannot do this as an organisation – as an impersonal, faceless institution or merely a logo. We need young, net-savvy Social Democrats at all levels to play an active part in online discussions, bringing to the table their particular issues, not in the manner of press releases, but rather in personal terms and in their own voice.

6. SPD as a Catch-all Party: Identity and Strategy

6.1 Social Democratic Identity

The core identity of the Social Democratic Party is to ac-tualise a politics oriented towards the basic values of free-dom, justice and solidarity, with practicable policy pro-grammes, and to become capable of winning a major-ity by a policy of broad social alliances. Its claim to be a catch-all party has always rested on this. As long as the SPD wants to remain a catch-all party it cannot neglect any one of the three abovementioned criteria. They mark the path to real political power, even if circumstances change. The federal election of 2009 brought home in no uncertain terms that good political programmes are not enough. In addition to the credibility of politicians, there must be a strong prospect of power so that voters see that voting for the SPD is worthwhile. This sets the SPD apart from small parties, which only have to present themselves to voters as a corrective to the policies of the major parties. There is no miniature version of a catch-all party, however. Besides effectively putting its message across, the SPD as a catch-all party needs a convincing strategy for winning a majority, one which the electorate clearly understands.

But in today's five-party system, how can the SPD regain a credible prospect of power? Two proposals are cur-rently doing the rounds. One of them is that the Social Democrats should seek to play a dominant role in the organisation of a centre-left camp; the other calls on the SPD to establish itself as an independent »profile« with a declared red-green preference. Both strategies are based on good arguments, but both also have their problems and unresolved issues. Taken together they contain all the elements needed to enable the Social Democrats to pursue majority power with confidence. The combina-tion of three strategic elements rooted in the core social democratic values appears, in the current situation, to be highly promising: proactively rising the party's profile, a red-green stance and an openness in principle to possible left-wing options under specific conditions.

Until now there has never been a political camp in the Federal Republic, in the true sense of the term: because next to a level of agreement on central political ques-tions, it requires above all consultation and cooperation. What does exist is a marked self-categorisation by vot-ers as centre-left and a corresponding sense of proximity to the policies of the three centre-left parties: in other words, a »virtual camp«. An association of these parties based on a quasi-contractual commitment – that is, an opposition coalition – would be, however, counterpro-ductive for the SPD. It would hinder political momentum and let Die Linke off the hook as far as democratic nor-malisation and the development of realistic and practica-ble policies is concerned. In addition, it would leave out of account voter migration and thus unnecessarily jeop-ardise the SPD's credibility gains and electoral chances. A strategy based on communicating a distinctive message with a clear red-green stance is the best solution as the main Social Democratic strategy, but it is incomplete. It would make it possible to recapture former or potential Social Democratic voters and put the party's own politi-cal identity centre-stage with regard to its policy and get-ting the message across. It must not be forgotten that in the 2009 general election the SPD lost large numbers of voters to the CDU, while others due to abstention. With a more focused party platform and enhanced cred-ibility, the SPD can win back most of these voters and, given the disastrous policies of the conservative-liberal government, probably also gain many others. The em-phasis must therefore be on carving out a distinctive pro-file for the party.

6.2 Strategy for Winning a Majority

Political camps are not objective facts but always rather the product of determined political action. There is a cen-tre-left spectrum in Germany – but because of the spe-cific character of Die Linke, the situation is quite different in eastern and in western Germany. Political differences between the parties involved arise in a number of dimen-sions. Besides the central economic and social dimen-sion, the cultural and democratic dimensions play a role. Strictly speaking, no party in Germany other than the current FDP can be considered a homogenous entity with regard to these dimensions, leaving aside the extreme right. Even in terms of economics there are left-wingers in the CDU and right-wingers among the Greens. Cul-tural libertarians may now be found in all parties – apart from the extreme right, of course – although to differ-ent degrees. This applies to both members and voters. It creates flexibility but also chronic risks for coalitions. Die Linke is home to some loose cannons and to con-fused and headstrong souls nostalgic for the GDR, but

the problem with its programme does not lie in its supposed extremism but rather in its sectarian detachment from reality and the typical experience that it does not reflect the mainstream of its representatives and officials. A viable coalition politics therefore cannot be based on a superstructure of groups between which there is only contractual agreement. If there is a real will, it must be politically constructed from heterogeneous and dynamic formations. The SPD must play a dominant role in this process, rooted in its core values and policies. It has to play a decisive role as an influence fostering the centre-left spectrum. The significance of such a process, if it takes place within the framework of public debates, consists of connecting up and mobilising different social milieus which is crucial in providing the social basis for cooperation in a centre-left government.

The cultural dimension of party differences is by no means unimportant for the Social Democrats but if one takes the key example of school and education policy, its ambiguity becomes evident because there is considerable agreement between parties which are otherwise presumed to be in polar opposition. Furthermore, in the present situation, the economic and social dimension and the environment undoubtedly constitute the focus of Social Democratic policy. As far as the FDP is concerned, there is little it can do in this area in the foreseeable future, despite a considerable need for it. And looking back at the party's chequered history, it can by no means be ruled out that, as a result of its current fundamental orientation crisis, it will attempt to rediscover its social side.

The German media somewhat parochially took the opportunity to brand the project of a minority government, which emerged from the government formation process, which took place in Düsseldorf in 2010, as fundamentally shaky and not serious. If one casts one's gaze around Europe, however, it becomes apparent that in a number of important countries – including Scandinavia and Spain – minority governments have successfully implemented social democratic policies, without threatening democratic stability. For Germany, too, it would only take getting used to the idea, politically and culturally and its rethinking by the media for such a project to be realised at federal level, as long as a compelling mandate could be obtained. The SPD would do well to remind society and public that in the current situation this can be one option, if not an ideal one.

The essentially correct strategy for the SPD of operating as an independent brand with a red-green orientation leaves two decisive questions unanswered. The first is that, as things stand at the moment, there is little prospect of an exclusively red-green majority and in certain circumstances the Greens might quickly drop it in favour of a black-green coalition if it does not prove possible to achieve a majority on the left. In the public arena and especially in the upcoming elections this strategy makes sense only if it is credibly broadened. Such broadening depends on the circumstances. Only if the FDP undergoes root and branch renewal as regards social policy could it possibly achieve this, which is unlikely. There remains only the loose cannon, Die Linke. In relation to them the SPD must, first of all, make it clear that, besides agreements in the economic-social and education policy-cultural areas, any possible national cooperation depends on a shift towards a more responsible foreign and European policy. In any case, it should propose a clear answer to the issue of democracy. Declaring a red-green preference in an election campaign, while announcing at the same time that the SPD is open to all sides of the political spectrum is not credible and leaves little realistic prospect of power. Constantly intoning that Die Linke is not really a party of government creates an unnecessary self-imposed stumbling block. If the voters reach the view that, in the end, this could lead just as easily to a grand coalition with the CDU or to an emergency compromise with the Liberals many will balk at it or shift their allegiance. Such a strategy cannot be conveyed credibly because it leaves open the key question. It is necessary to begin a public debate on such strategic options early as a condition of its later success because it would significantly diminish the danger that the media and political opponents will confuse the public during election time with denunciations and suspicions.

The strategy of standing as an independent brand with a preference for a red-green coalition seems feasible only if the right political conditions are laid down under which the SPD might be inclined to entertain the left-wing option. This would amount to a »red-green plus« configuration. Introducing a left-wing option into the debate early on within the framework of clear guidelines and allowing people gradually to get used to it would be the smartest strategy. The conditions for cooperation with Die Linke are very different in eastern and in western Germany. Politically, in eastern Germany the SPD must not only focus its efforts on a much smaller »centre« than in western Germany – in other words, on those who have

made it but whose values are based on solidarity – but also compete with a strong left which better represents eastern German interests, pointing to the fact that only they can promote those interests at the national level. Since the representation of regional interests is more important than insistence on existing political differences, expectations of cooperation between the SPD and Die Linke are increasing in eastern Germany. With the retirement of the previous generation of former SED functionaries, practically speaking this is already taking place.

The basis of the debate about the possibilities for cooperation must be based on the core Social Democratic values and existing consensus in the areas of school reform, safeguarding the welfare state, the democratic embedding of markets and health care policy. In international and European policy, which are also decisive areas of government responsibility, every effort must be made to secure responsible and practicable policies. It has been suggested in recent academic debate that in future the term »catch-all party« will describe those parties in the five-party system that are able to organise one of the two major political spectrums – centre-right or centre-left – in a coalition and to decisively influence politics. For the SPD this appears to be both eminently feasible and richly promising – but also the only realistic one.

The form of cooperation here remains open: it might be selective cooperation in a red-green minority government with Die Linke, tolerance based on agreement, or even a coalition. This can be determined only on the basis of the election results – Die Linke should not be given the impression that its position is secure, come what may. In all three cases, however, it would be guaranteed that a vote for the SPD can be converted into political power, which not only promises the implementation of Social Democratic policies but also can deliver it.

However, the SPD as a catch-all party must focus on taking every opportunity to position itself as the leader in a red-green government. Germany needs it and, as the party's recent development shows, it can be done.

About the authors

Wolfgang Jüttner is a member of the State Parliament of Lower Saxony since 1986. 2005–2011 he was member of the SPD Executive Committee.

Wolfgang Merkel, professor for political sciences at Humboldt-University, Berlin, and director of the department Democracy: Structures, Performance and Challenges at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (Social Science Research Center Berlin). He is a member of the SPD's Basic Values Commission.

Thomas Meyer, professor emeritus for political sciences, is chief editor of the *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte* and vice-chairman of the SPD's Basic Values Commission.

Julian Nida-Rümelin is professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, where he teaches philosophy and political theory. He is chairman of the SPD's basic Value Commission and member of the SPD's executive committee.

Christina Schildmann, MA in political sciences and history is programme officer for family policy and gender at Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin. She is a member of the SPD's Basic Value Commission.

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