

Jana Faus, Horand Knaup

Mistakes made – lessons learnt

The SPD's federal election success was not down to chance.

AT A GLANCE

In the wake of the disastrous 2017 federal election campaign, the SPD commissioned an external working group to analyse and reassess their campaign. What the SPD learnt from this and what the other parties' strategists could have learned is discussed in this text.

EVERY FEDERAL ELECTION IS UNIQUE

Every federal election campaign has its unforeseeable peculiarities. The months leading up to the election were overshadowed by the pandemic, which made it almost impossible to stage major events indoors. In addition, for the first time three parties put up a candidate for chancellor – a tribute to the fragmentation of party politics in the Federal Republic as well. And for the first time, a once-familiar duel between two candidates turned into a three-way fight, which initially became a duel between Laschet and Baerbock, and then on the home straight once again reverted to a duel between Laschet and Scholz.

In this extraordinary and volatile constellation, the SPD seemed to have no chance of reaching even the 20 percent threshold four months before the election. It was a party that had been written off, with a seemingly uninspiring candidate and rather pitiful popularity ratings, even in the social sphere, its traditional core competence. In the end, it not only crossed the finish line as the strongest party group with 25.7 percent, it surpassed the 2017 result by an astonishing 5.2 percent. The SPD thus turned in exactly the same result as in the 2013 federal election.

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

One of the remarkable decisions made by party leader Martin Schulz in 2017 was to have an external working group review

his own rise and fall in popularity among voters. While the results of "learning from mistakes" might not have been entirely flattering for him, in retrospect they helped lay the foundations for the SPD's success four years later.

Some of the recommendations from the paper, which were adopted by Olaf Scholz's handpicked election campaign team, but also by the entire party leadership, are:

- The party's unity was unique – even in frustrating times that went on for months. Never before had the SPD managed to present such a united front during a campaign. This is especially remarkable given that the Geywitz/Scholz team had suffered a defeat at the end of November 2019 in the runoff against Esken/Walter-Borjans for chairpersonship of the party. The newly elected party chairs opted to not exercise their traditional right of first refusal to run for chancellor, however, instead agreeing to have Olaf Scholz stand as candidate. It is to the credit of the two party chairpersons and Secretary General Lars Klingbeil that they pooled their forces, held the party together and swiftly addressed the party's internal "healing process".
- The early naming of the candidate also proved extremely helpful. When Annalena Baerbock and Armin Laschet were billed as candidates by their respective parties in April 2021, Olaf Scholz had already been screened many times and thoroughly analysed and discussed by the media – including his weaknesses.
- There was a clearly defined strategic centre in the SPD surrounding the candidate. Campaign manager Lars Klingbeil organised the election campaign around Scholz and ensured that work at party headquarters was marked by a spirit of cooperation.
- The parliamentary party group and the state premiers were involved in formulating the party platform, but publicly kept out of discussions regarding its content.
- The party leadership managed to package the election platform into a solid compendium void of the usual long-winded prose, keeping it short and concise (64 pages) as never before.
- When the SPD performs weakly, it always has weak competency ratings in the social sphere. By putting the minimum

wage, a citizen's income and affordable housing at the centre of the party campaign and sweeping away any doubts about the level of pensions, Olaf Scholz also shored up this flank.

- The good work performed in the coalition government by the Social Democratic federal ministers was no doubt also a major source of support. Hubertus Heil, Franziska Giffey, Christine Lambrecht, Svenja Schulze and, to a lesser extent, Heiko Maas clearly stood out from their Christian Democratic colleagues in qualitative terms. Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz in particular did everything right when he sought the post as head of the Federal Ministry of Finance in 2018, however: during two major crises (COVID-19 and the flood disaster), he not only pumped money into the economy quickly and broadly, but at the same time underpinned his image as a statesman who rises to the occasion in times of crisis. This undoubtedly benefited him in the election campaign.
- Long before election day, the SPD had expanded its social media department. Although the digital native generations were not among the strongest SPD cohorts in this federal election, the party's engagement in the social media realm early on was without a doubt a boon.

THE MISTAKES OF OTHERS

Of course, Olaf Scholz and his election campaign also benefited from the blunders of the competition. Laschet's and Baerbock's stumbling about, indecisiveness and mistakes overshadowed the extremely defensive basic approach underlying the Scholz campaign. In a different setting, the SPD candidate and his pitch could easily have been labelled "boring". And it all could have turned out even worse, as the events surrounding Wirecard, CumEx and, most recently, the FIU could have caused considerable distress for the candidate. But the team around Scholz appeared to have anticipated possible mischief and managed to keep Scholz unscathed. This made the mishaps and failures of the competitors all the more palpable.

Both the CDU/CSU and the Greens took their time with the official nomination of their candidate for the chancellorship, in the end too long. For the CDU/CSU in particular, the decision-making process was extremely excruciating and already spawned the next mistake, or was its consequence, as it were: the public power struggle between CSU leader Markus Söder and Armin Laschet of the CDU exposed the discord between the affiliated parties, but also within the CDU, at an early stage. While Söder repeatedly appealed to the grassroots, the Bundestag party group and his greater popularity ratings in opinion polls, Laschet insisted that the party's federal executive committee should appoint the candidate, knowing full well that he would have the better cards with the CDU party leadership than his opponent.

And so it came to pass: with the support of Wolfgang Schäuble and Volker Bouffier, Laschet was nominated as candidate for chancellor in a long meeting of the party's executive committee.

Throughout the election campaign, Söder repeatedly made it clear that he thought he was the better candidate. But other voices in the CDU, especially from the conservative camp, also publicly criticised the decision by the federal executive committee or at least let it be known that they too only

considered Laschet to be the right candidate with reservations. But why should voters support a candidate if their own tribe – in this case the party rank and file – do not?

All the more so given the fact that the trust and confidence of voters in their political leader in North Rhine-Westphalia, where Laschet still holds the office of state premier, began to wane. He was criticised for his management of the Corona crisis, and his involvement in the lurid "mask affair" dominated the headlines. So on the one hand Laschet's campaign lacked the necessary unity, while on the other he missed out on a major opportunity to present himself as an energetic crisis manager, to pose as a leader who can be trusted even in the face of dire challenges.

BUT THEN CAME THE FLOOD

The challenge posed by the pandemic was suddenly followed by a second event of a similar nature in the guise of the severe flooding that devastated parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. More than 180 people lost their lives and many more their entire belongings. But the hapless Laschet failed to react in a fitting manner.

Instead, many began to distance themselves from their state premier because he lacked poise, while his PR people obstructed rescue workers in their work and then produced unfortunate images by placing him in front of a mountainous heap of broken furniture for a press conference. And then, on top of it all, came the now legendary picture of him laughing and joking around during a speech given by the German president in a town ravaged by the flood.

So Laschet not only failed to turn the flood disaster to his own advantage. Quite to the contrary, he turned it into his own disaster, from which he subsequently emerged as a clown – a label that does not come from the authors, but from respondents in various surveys and focus groups.

Laschet's party colleague and caretaker German Chancellor Angela Merkel initially acted as if the election campaign was none of her business, demonstrating scarcely any public support for the CDU/CSU candidate. Even during the flood disaster, she travelled first to Rhineland-Palatinate and only then to North Rhine-Westphalia. It was in Rhineland-Palatinate that those memorable empathetic pictures of her walking hand in hand through the disaster area with the SPD State Premier Malu Dreyer made their way into the press. It was the kind of sympathy that many people would have liked to have seen from Armin Laschet.

At the same time, Olaf Scholz from his office as Minister of Finance once again succeeded in demonstrating his crisis-management competence by providing financial resources for hard-hit areas quickly and without red tape.

In the early stages of the Corona pandemic, he had along similar lines quickly injected hundreds of billions of euros in financial resources into the economy, thereby staving off an economic collapse.

Laschet, however, showed neither the necessary flair nor the required resilience in the face of the crisis. Nor did Laschet speak the language of the people. Instead of a compelling plan, a surprising, decisive and persuasive policy proposal, he

announced a “Planning Acceleration Act”. This was a monstrosity of a term couched in legalese suggesting less a better future, and instead evoking all the allures of a dreary administrative act. Because this did not spark much enthusiasm, three weeks before the election he tried to pose as a skilled crisis manager by presenting his ideas for a future crisis-management team. Previously, he had expressly opposed having a team at his side – until he was forced to abandon his opposition in view of the poor ratings in opinion polls. Voters failed to discern any deeper meaning or significance of this team down to the end, and its eight members also largely remained in the shadows.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Only late in the election campaign, in the second TV duel, did Laschet shift up a gear, go into attack mode and lash out at Scholz, who, however, was able to calmly parry the thrust. The attack came too late: by this point in time, an above-average number of absentee ballots had already been requested and, one could assume, also filled in.

The Greens also nominated their candidate for chancellor, Annalena Baerbock, late in the game. Too late. Although the Greens were clearly more united than the CDU/CSU, the long hesitation and speculation about the top candidate caused the media to focus all the more on Laschet and Baerbock.

This initially proved to be an advantage for Baerbock, but just like Laschet, she was unable to take advantage of her being suddenly thrust into the limelight. Obviously, the Greens did not have an adequate plan in place to fend off possible attacks on their leading lady. And so the campaign became bogged down in rear-guard actions fending off accusations that Baerbock had embellished her CV or committed plagiarism in her book. Instead of a measured, organised approach, reactions by the Greens appeared edgy and headless. They called in the well-known media lawyer Christian Schertz to protect her from the “attempt at character assassination”. There was little semblance of unflappable confidence and poise in it all. After this, Baerbock vanished from the scene for a few weeks, more or less vacating the stage to Robert Habeck.

In an election campaign that was primarily about finding the right successor to Merkel and leading the country out of the current crisis and through the coming crisis, a personal touch is the be-all and end-all. The Greens did not succeed in this. The campaign remained as inconsistent as the positioning of the candidate for the office of chancellor. The target group of voters that the Greens wanted to reach remained hazy until the very end, as evidenced, for example, by an ill-fated campaign clip in which jolly senior citizens warbled a kumbaya-esque ditty based on an old German campfire song “No Country More Beautiful than Ours at this Time”. Although the Greens celebrated the number of clicks, the clip for the most part attracted ridicule, derision and malicious glee and is unlikely to have convinced at least the younger, digital native electorate.

Shortly afterwards, the Green strategists unveiled another commercial with Baerbock in the centre, painting a decidedly gloomy picture and warning of the catastrophic effects of climate change in rapid-fire sequences. How this was supposed

to rhyme with “No Country More Beautiful than Ours at this Time” also remained a mystery to voters.

One could have expected that the flood disaster would benefit the Greens in particular. The Greens could have driven home their climate protection policy ideas; victims of climate change experienced its impact first-hand. But the Greens failed to make this connection in their campaign.

THE FAVOUR OF THE HOUR

Instead, Olaf Scholz seized the opportunity – and was not rattled by an unaccustomed role: Suddenly Armin Laschet was forced to go on the attack, and the Social Democrat was able to parry the thrust. All of a sudden it was the Christian Democrat who was under constant scrutiny, while Scholz emerged unscathed, seemingly beyond any and all reproach.

Especially because he did many things right: he concentrated his proposals on a few key stances – minimum wage, a citizen’s income, housing and respect. He stayed true to his simple, sometimes lacklustre language, and he put real-life issues at the centre of his campaign: pay, pensions and housing. The Union failed to clearly determine its position on many of these issues within the party.

And not least, Scholz leveraged his office as Federal Minister of Finance. He landed in Washington in the government plane amidst great media fanfare, he pumped out hundreds of billions of euros to counter the Corona crisis, he was also on the spot with a lot of money immediately after the floods devastated Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. He demonstrated problem-solving skills where his opponent Laschet produced awkward and untoward images in the media. Scholz managed the tightrope walk between imputed solid governmental skills and a diffuse desire for change in society. Something the SPD had not been able to offer for some time.

Olaf Scholz has catapulted his party back to heights no longer thought possible. The ingredients in his recipe for success were a tablespoon of craftsmanship, a dash of experience from previous campaigns and, yes, a teaspoon of luck. Whether this is enough for the chancellorship is yet to be seen. But in the wake of this campaign and the well-deserved election success, there is much to suggest that this may very well be the case. ←

AUTHORS

Jana Faus is co-founder and Managing Director of pollytix strategic research gmbh, a research-based consulting agency. She is the author of numerous studies, including for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. As a member of an external working group, she analysed the SPD's campaign in the 2017 federal election together with Horand Knaup, Yvonne Schroth, Michael Rüter and Frank Stauss.

Horand Knaup, a SPIEGEL correspondent for many years, is now a journalist and author in Berlin and co-author of the SPD election analysis "Learning from mistakes". His most recently publication is: "Alleiner kannst du gar nicht sein: Unsere Volksvertreter zwischen Macht, Sucht und Angst" (co-author Peter Dausend), dtv, 2020.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Faus, Jana; Knaup, Horand; Rüter, Michael; Schroth, Yvonne; Stauss, Frank 2018: Aus Fehlern lernen: Eine Analyse der Bundestagswahl 2017, SPD, https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Sonstiges/Evaluation_SPD__BTW2017.pdf (28 September 2021).

IMPRINT

Oktober 2021

© **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung**

Published by: Analysis, Planning and Consulting Division
Godesberger Allee 149, 53175 Bonn, Germany
Fax 0228 883 9205

www.fes.de/apb

The FES is responsible for this publication:
Jan Niklas Engels, Analysis, Planning and Consulting Division.

Orders/Contact: ap-cy@fes.de

Cover photo: picture-alliance.com / Frank Hoermann / Sven Simon

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Commercial use of media published by the FES is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. FES publications may not be used for election campaign purposes.

ISBN 978-3-98628-000-0