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FOCUS GERMANY

The Elections in Germany and the SPD

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Germany will be governed in the years to come by a grand coalition. The SPD can be content with this outcome, since the party achieved a far better result than many observers had expected. Among younger people in particular, the SPD was far more popular than the conservative CDU/CSU. The following paper outlines the SPD's election result, the central elements of its election campaign and the probable key areas on which the grand coalition will concentrate.

Germany's next government will most probably be a grand coalition comprising the three political parties, SPD, CDU and CSU. Any other configuration now seems highly unlikely: the rise of the *Linkspartei* (party of the left) robbed the traditional coalition blocks of the post-war era in Germany of their ability to achieve majorities in the *Bundestag*.

The election result defied all the predictions of the opinion poll institutes and professional political commentators:

Party	Percentage	Seats
SPD	34.3 (-4.3)	222
CDU and CSU	35.2 (-3,3)	226
FDP (liberals)	9.8 (+2.4)	61
Linkspartei (party of the left)	8.7 (+4.7)	54
Die Grünen (Greens)	8.1 (-0.4)	51

The SPD is, from a purely legal point of view, by far the largest political party in the country. The CDU and CSU are independent parties with their own legal status, their own chairmen, executive boards, financial structures and political foundations. This is the basis for the SPD's claim to provide the new chancellor in a grand coalition from its own ranks, being the largest single party. There is uncertainty however, as to whether this approach will succeed, since the CDU and CSU traditionally form a single group in the German lower chamber of government, the *Bundestag*.

How did the Germans vote?

If we take a closer look at the election results with regard to age, social and regional criteria, the following picture emerges:

- The SPD has far more support among **younger voters** than the CDU/CSU under Angela Merkel. 38% of 18-24-year-olds voted SPD, while 26% voted CDU/CSU. The SPD's lead over the CDU/CSU among 25-34-year-olds was 3%. The only age group where the conservative parties got a larger share of the vote is the 60+ group.
- This difference is even more marked among **young women** between 18 and 24: 40% voted for the SPD, while the CDU/CSU achieved only 26%.
- The SPD has a lead over the CDU/CSU in 12 out of the 16 federal **Länder**; only in the predominantly Roman Catholic south does the CDU/CSU dominate the vote.
- The difference in voting behaviour between **West and East** was especially marked this time round: while the CDU/CSU, as a result of its dominance in the south, was slightly in front of the SPD in the western part of the country, the SPD was the strongest party among east German voters, followed by the *Linkspartei*, with the CDU in third position.
- The real novelty was the strong showing of the newly formed *Linkspartei*. Many voters deserted the SPD to vote for the Party of the Left, though supporters from other parties also joined their ranks. In the western part of the country, the new party would have narrowly missed achieving the 5% hurdle to representation in parliament, though its 4.9% result was just a whisper away.
- From a **socio-political viewpoint**, the SPD maintained a lead among white-collar and blue-collar workers, while the CDU/CSU was more popular with pensioners, civil servants and self-employed people.
- For 24% of SPD voters the party's **candidate**, Gerhard Schröder, was decisive in influencing their decision to vote SPD; among CDU/CSU voters only 16% were decisively motivated to vote for the party due to its candidate.
- Economic, employment and socio-political topics were key issues in deciding which party to vote for, with the latter being especially important for SPD voters. **Social justice** was the topic which motivated SPD voters most (45%), followed by concerns about the economy (26 %) and employment policy (27%) and foreign and security policies (23%).
- Neither of the two large parties succeeded in really exploiting their **voter potential** to the limit; this problem was greater with the CDU/CSU than with the SPD, which stage-managed a very successful election campaign.
- In comparison with the 2002 election, the **SPD lost about 2.3 million votes**. This loss of votes was distributed as follows: to the *Linkspartei*: 40% (-930,000); to the CDU/CSU: 27% (-620,000); to the non-voters: 16% (-370,000); to the Greens: 6% (-140,000); to the FDP: 5.2% (-120,000).
- The new **Party of the Left** was able to procure voters from all of the other parties. They won 2.2 million votes from the other parties in the following percentages: from the SPD: 970,000 (44%); from non-voters: 430,000 (19.5%); from the CDU/CSU: 290,000 (13%); from the Greens: 240,000 (10%); from the FDP: 100,000 (4.5%).

- The **decision** about which party to vote for was made later than in any federal election to date. Almost a third of voters only decided who to vote for in the last week before the election, and 13% only decided on election day.
- At 77.7% **voter turn-out** was below the 2002 level (79.1%).

The SPD's election campaign

When, at the end of May, Gerhard Schröder took Germans by surprise in announcing general elections after losing the regional election in the SPD's traditional stronghold of North Rhine-Westphalia, only half of the people who had voted for the SPD in 2002 declared that they would vote for the party again. How did the SPD succeed in turning the situation round, averting the smashing victory for the CDU/CSU predicted by all the pundits? What it comes down to is an intelligent election campaign which admittedly could not avoid the party taking second place to the CDU/CSU, but did achieve two things:

- It motivated a considerable proportion of those lost SPD voters to vote SPD after all;
- It significantly reduced, in the course of the election campaign, the number of people who were seriously thinking of voting CDU/CSU.

These were the central elements of the election campaign strategy:

- The election HQ was located at the party's central office, unlike the 1998 and 2002 elections, when it was located elsewhere. This meant there was close liaison between the party apparatus and the election team which generated a strong "togetherness" and an equally strong motivation for the team.
- The election programme was formulated in such a way that all the wings of the party could agree on it; internal dissent and contradictions - one of the factors which Chancellor Schröder had cited as a reason for the necessity of early elections - were such kept to a minimum.
- The election campaign was conceived as a "campaign on principles", in which a fundamental decision was at stake: what sort of social model should prevail in Germany in the future. Only once the campaign had been framed on that topic was it possible to effectively claim that the policy proposals of the CDU/CSU and in particular of their principal financial advisor, Professor Kirchhof, were the expression of a new "social coldness" on the part of the conservatives.
- One difficult decision was the question as to how to position the party in relationship to the new Left Party. It turned out to be correct not to place the differences with the party of the left at the heart of the election campaign, but rather to proceed with the campaign down a middle line against the CDU/CSU. Concentrating the campaign against the conservatives on the topic of social justice was a way of simultaneously sharpening the awareness of those voters who had seen the red-green reform policies of recent years as lacking a social dimension.
- The personal commitment of Chancellor Schröder was critical in an extremely intensive personal election campaign in which Gerhard Schröder made about 35% more campaign appearances than in the 2002 election. The reason for this was Gerhard Schröder's undiminished popularity, which made him the clearly preferable candidate for chancellor in all the direct comparisons with Angela Merkel.
- The strong bias of the media in favour of Angela Merkel and the CDU/CSU meant that the SPD had to find ways of circumventing the media to get its message directly to the electorate. The methods used to achieve this were direct appearances on TV and radio and mass events in public places in front of several thousand spectators.
- The SPD's communication strategy addressed both the party's own issues and proposals and those of its main rival. Against a background of general dissatisfaction due to mass unemployment and a low growth rate, the CDU/CSU waged an unfocused

"time for change" election campaign which did not enter into any detailed discussion on the tangible effects of its proposed "reforms". The real effects of the CDU/CSU's tax and socio-political proposals therefore had to be integrated into the SPD election campaign in order to make it clear to voters that the CDU/CSU proposals would mean a real drop in income and quality of life for lower-income groups. For this reason, the proposed policies of the SPD and CDU/CSU were systematically opposed in advertisements and on billboards together with their tangible results.

This strategy was only successful however because the CDU/CSU made serious mistakes in their election campaign: Their over-confident and non-intensive approach relied heavily on the assumption that their initial advantage in all opinion polls could not be reversed; with Angela Merkel, they had an unpopular candidate who was left wanting in all popularity criteria in comparison with Gerhard Schröder; and finally they were crucially weakened by the presentation of an unpopular economic strategy provided by Ms Merkel's "secret weapon", Professor Paul Kirchhof. His odd mixture of neo-liberalism and cultural conservatism did in various points not even conform to the stated official CDU/CSU policies (e.g. the flat tax).

At the end of the day, two factors were decisive: Ms Merkel's lack of personal popularity and a strategic mistake in the CDU/CSU's election campaign. Driven by early high poll results and the ideological expectations of opinion-makers and the media in "Spaceship Berlin" (Germany's equivalent of the British "Westminster village"), the CDU was lured into fighting an election campaign remote from social reality and out of tune with the mood of the population. Contrary to the media's suggestions, the German population did not yearn to feel the harsh sting of the modernisation whip, wielded by "Angie", the Thatcher-like reform dominatrix. While Angela Merkel allowed herself to be lured into taking on this role, Gerhard Schröder represented a body politic which after 16 years of static CDU/CSU governance under Helmut Kohl was finally facing necessary reforms head-on without losing sight of a sense of social equilibrium. Despite continuing serious problems in the labour market, this position was still popular enough to achieve a result for the SPD that was far better than had been expected a mere three months beforehand.

Perspectives

In the next few years, a grand coalition will concentrate on implementing fundamental modernisation measures in those policy areas where there is relatively wide consensus between the two main parties. Common ground exists on questions of reform of Germany's complicated federal system, pensions and in some areas of economic and fiscal policy. There is also broad agreement on matters of domestic security and energy policy. Little argument exists in the fields of foreign and security policy, especially since the CDU/CSU had to admit that Schröder's stance on Germany's role in the Iraq war is supported by a large majority of the population.

The fact that this will be the first grand coalition government since 1969 should not however blur the real political uniqueness of the recent election. The appearance on the political stage of the new party of the left means an additional player has entered German politics, making the classical arithmetic of coalition government even more complicated. "Traffic light coalitions" made up of one large and two small parties will be on the increase. This might also mean that in the future the political centre of gravity in parliament will move to the left: in purely arithmetical terms the number of seats held by the SPD, the Greens (a party on the liberal left of the middle class) and the *Linkspartei* form an absolute majority. Yet, for the medium term at least, the SPD views this majority as politically non-viable, because the differences in the parties' positions at national level are much too great.