

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title and subtitle.

# What Went Wrong?

## The German Elections 2013 and the Score of the SPD

**ERNST HILLEBRAND (Ed.)**

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- The German elections from September 2013 brought a disappointing result for the opposition. The voters did not reinstall the outgoing government, but they gave Angela Merkel's CDU an excellent score with 41.5 per cent of the vote.
- After a disappointing campaign, SPD scored one of its worst results ever, gaining only 25.7 per cent of the vote. With this result, the party lies clearly behind her traditional main rival, the Christian Democrats. The party will now form a coalition government with the CDU under the leadership of Angela Merkel.
- The analysis of the election and its result has only begun. This reader presents a selection of articles that have been published in major German centre-left reviews after the election. They analyse the election campaign and the result of the polling and try to draw first lessons for the future of the SPD.



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## Foreword and Introduction

Ernst Hillebrand

On 22 September 2013 Germany held national parliamentary elections. The outcome was a clear defeat for the SPD and its opposition partner, the Green Party. The Christian Democratic Union led by Chancellor Angela Merkel achieved a very good showing of 41.5 per cent. But their liberal-conservative coalition partner, the FDP, lost almost ten percentage points and was ejected from the Bundestag with 4.8 per cent of the vote. A new conservative euro-sceptic party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), only narrowly failed to enter parliament. The challengers – SPD, Green Party and Left Party – missed their self-imposed targets and collectively lost votes. Only the SPD was able to record a slight increase, but nonetheless landed one of the worst results in its history with 25.7 per cent (after 23 per cent in 2009). Experiencing yet another defeat represented a bitter disappointment for the SPD. Among nearly all voter groups, it lagged well behind its main rival, the CDU. This was even the case among voters that traditionally lean social democratic, such as blue- and white-collar workers and women. The CDU also fared better among the young and in the eastern regions of Germany.

So why did the election turn out so disappointingly for the SPD, even though many of their political demands, especially those for greater social justice, were widely popular? This volume brings together articles published in the weeks following the election, seeking the causes of defeat and exploring what the result means for the future of the SPD, and for the wider political landscape in Germany. The articles are, with one exception, translations of pieces that appeared in progressive theory journals in the weeks following the election. They have initially been published in the *Frankfurter Hefte/Neue Gesellschaft*, the magazine *Berliner Republik* and the left-liberal *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*. The authors include researchers and journalists, as well as active participants in the election campaign and staff of various political institutions. There is no common denominator to be found: the texts are as multifaceted as the opinions and explanations voiced in the public debate after the elections.

The 2013 elections probably represent something of a political watershed for Germany. Since reunification its political landscape had been extremely stable: On one side the conservative camp of Christian democrats and free liberals, on the other the »red/green« camp of SPD and Green Party. And on the left margin the Left Party, which nobody wanted as a partner. The 2013 election result has shifted that scene thoroughly. What we observe is a structural weakness of the SPD and a stagnation of the Green Party. Whereas the Left Party looks stabilized, the neo-liberal FDP looks fatally wounded. And then there is for the first time in German post-war politics the possibility of a populist euro-critical party gaining parliamentary seats. These developments transform the political battlefield for all actors involved. In the foreseeable future, there will be no more campaigns revolving around »black-yellow« and »red-green« camps, as all parties will have to look for potential partners on the other side of the traditional left-right divide. The »grand coalition« that will be formed these days is a clear expression of this new constellation. And the day Merkel goes, even the great winner of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, the CDU will end up facing problems, having lost the FDP as its strategic partner. Beneath the surface of the continuity at the helm, Germany's politics have been well stirred up. The following contributions try to explore how this came about and how similar defeats of the progressive parties can be avoided in future.

In a fast-moving age it seems sensible to begin by reminding ourselves of a few key facts about the campaign, as the following contributions often explicitly or implicitly refer to these events and circumstances.

- SPD candidate Peer Steinbrück was nominated at the end of September 2012 in a rather improvised process without involving the party members. Steinbrück was regarded as a representative of the party's technocratic wing and a committed defender of Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 reforms.
- In Angela Merkel, Steinbrück faced an exceptionally popular Chancellor whose lead in personal popularity



ratings he was never able to close. The CDU's campaign was strongly personalised around Angela Merkel.

- Steinbrück's candidacy suffered from the outset from organisational deficits and communicative blunders that generated a negative public image. Reports of large lecture fees received while he was serving as a Bundestag member sowed doubt and animosity. The SPD's whole election campaign was affected by these image problems.
- The SPD committed itself at a very early stage to a coalition with the Green Party («red/green»). When the polls showed that they were not going to achieve a majority, the SPD and the Green Party were left lacking a realistic power perspective. But the SPD categorically excluded any coalition involving the Left Party.
- The Green Party's campaign focused less on classic ecological issues than on questions of social justice and economic policy. In particular, it proposed tax increases for the most affluent ten per cent of the population, among whom many green voters can be found.

## PART ONE: THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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# Stability Patriotism Versus Social Justice: Government and Opposition Discourses and Communication Strategies

Christian Kellermann and Benjamin Mikfeld

How can the election result of 22 September be explained? Why did the voters trust the incumbent, Chancellor Angela Merkel, more than the opposition? This article sets out to analyse which discourses were decisive, which feelings, desires and fears the party campaigns aroused, and what influence this had on the final outcome. We do not, however, in this contribution examine the usual topics of electoral analysis, such as the polling figures for competence and the image of the parties and their leading candidates. We concentrate instead on the economic situation and how it was perceived by the voters, as this was ultimately decisive.

### The central framework: crisis and Europe

One specific and defining feature of this election was the contrast between relative stability in Germany and economic instability in other parts of Europe. This issue strongly (but implicitly) determined which policies were perceived as »right« and »wrong« (or »good«/»bad«) during the campaign. In this context, the evolution of the global financial crisis since 2008 played an important role. Angela Merkel succeeded in reinterpreting the crisis of finance capitalism as a crisis of state debt – and thus as a failure of the state rather than the market.<sup>1</sup> This model also formed the basis for her interpretation of the crisis during the election year, the general line being that the fundamental problem of the crisis countries was their large debts and lack of competitiveness. The recipe for Europe was »more German medicine« – and that meant

1. Her task was made easier by the way the financial crisis caught the SPD unprepared. In government itself from 1998, it had participated in the liberalisation of financial markets, hoping that this would stimulate growth. Attempts to introduce corrections were not pursued energetically enough, and remained restricted to the technical level without tackling the systemic problems. Ultimately, there was insufficient understanding of the need for political and economic analysis of a brand of capitalism driven by financial markets.

above all austerity and structural reforms. This conservative/liberal crisis discourse remained predominant far into the 2013 election year. Chancellor Merkel's polling figures tracked all-time highs to the end. She was the »protector of our currency« and guaranteed »stability and order in Europe«. And the louder the foreign criticism of the »German way« became, the greater her popularity at home.

The economic coordinates for the election campaign can thus be summarised in three points:

1. Successful crisis intervention and a good run for the German economy and public finances (thanks to low interest rates and a weak euro) made Germany a globally envied employment and economic »miracle«.
2. Although this »miracle« is fragile, depending on many external factors, no immediate sense of crisis has emerged in Germany. The non-simultaneity of the crisis (no acute symptoms in Germany, but deep depression in large parts of Europe and the rest of the world) made it an abstract matter »out there«, to be kept well at arm's length. At most there were worries that »our« money might be spent on »their« crisis.
3. At the height of the financial crisis the conservatives distinguished the successful German »social market economy« from deregulated capitalism »out there« or in the United States. Later, the overindebted states in Europe became the antithesis of the German model.

In the 2013 election year the political debate was correspondingly marked by two different views of the situation in Germany.

- The government's perspective concentrated on the relatively good economic situation. The German economy was presented as the growth engine of Europe, even if the rate in 2012 was just 0.7 per cent. The unemployment rate of seven per cent was comparatively low. Against this background the government declared itself »the best government since reunification«.

- The opposition perspective was directed towards the complexities and contradictions of the social and economic situation and sought to highlight four main negative aspects. *Firstly*, that developments in the labour market were less positive, with Germany now possessing Europe's largest low-wage sector and witnessing proliferating misuse of agency labour, outsourcing and subcontracting. *Secondly*, the opposition asserted, inequality of private wealth was continuing to expand, and indeed accelerating in the aftermath of the financial crisis, while at the same time the state budget deficit was growing strongly. *Thirdly*, too little was being invested in Germany in comparison with the EU average. And lastly, as the opposition's *fourth* point, critical price trends were affecting basic goods and services (especially housing rents and electricity prices).

The relatively positive economic trends of the years leading up to the election changed the electorate's perception. Over the entire preceding decade unemployment had been identified as a central problem in surveys. But from 2011 it was joined by the »euro crisis/debt crisis« issue, which for a time became the most important problem for the public. *Personal* material concerns now topped surveys about »the worries of the Germans«. These vague worries coincided at the end of 2010 with a turnaround in the public's assessment of the general economic situation. Since then the proportion of citizens who regard the economic situation as »good« has outnumbered those who believe it to be »poor«. So now the brief blossoming of Keynesianism anti-crisis politics had little to offer for a progressive election campaign.

## Two discourse strategies: Stability and security versus social justice

These different perspectives also marked the boundary between the political camps. Whereas most of the governing conservative camp propagated »staying the course«, the progressive camp aimed for a change of po-

litical direction. The two camps consequently pursued different discourse strategies during the election campaign.

The discourse strategy of the conservative camp:  
»stay the course, Germany«

The governing conservative camp backed a discourse strategy built around the central promise of »stability by staying the course«. The Christian democratic parties (CDU and CSU) were implicitly able to build on their reputations as the »natural parties of government« and their traditional image for greater competence in economic matters. Allusions to the relatively good economic situation and the »German way« of dealing with the crisis were therefore also always meant as warnings that changing the government could only make matters worse. CDU Secretary-General Hermann Gröhe explicitly placed the conservative strategy in a historic tradition: »Adenauer won a great election victory with the warning ›no experiments.<sup>2</sup> That would still make an excellent poster today.«

The conservative discourse strategy consisted of three elements:

- The most important element was Chancellor Merkel's personification of the stability promise; her reputation for credibility and competence reached far into the progressive electorate. While her lack of direction was criticised by political adversaries (»Sometimes I'm liberal, sometimes I'm conservative, sometimes I'm Christian and social«), the public interpreted this not as aimless, but rather positively as unideological and pragmatic. Her apparently calm and amiable manner made her at the same time the antithesis to the (generally male) stereotype of the imperious politician.

- The second element was to package the economic success message in a »we narrative«: Through our own reforms and hard work we Germans have together laid the foundations for our economic fortune. A »we« message is all the more emotionally effective where it can be contrasted to »the others«: »They« being the overindebted European countries against whom the Germans' savings must be protected. The stability patri-

2. Konrad Adenauer was West Germany's first Chancellor from 1949 to 1963. To this day he symbolizes stability and continuity in German post-war politics.

otism propagated by the conservatives built on internal well-being and pride and external dissociation. Germany adopted the role of taskmaster and disciplinarian of the European Union.

- Element number three consisted in defusing the left's equality promises. Firstly, certain very popular political demands (such as a statutory minimum wage, rent capping) were taken on board and thus at least partially neutralised. Secondly, the opposition's tax proposals were presented as acutely endangering economic success (and on top of that being unfair and/or unnecessary). »Record tax revenues« for the state, the conservatives argued, made tax increases superfluous and would only lead to further distortion and lowering of income for many. The focus was on »the middle class« and its heightened fear of additional burdens.

#### Discourse strategy of the progressive camp: »A fairer Germany«

The progressive or left-wing camp essentially comprised the SPD, the Green Party and the Left Party. Its shared message was that the country has a fairness problem that is both socially and economically counterproductive. The central promise was going like this: »more sustainable prosperity through social justice«. It came with a whole series of demands including a legal minimum wage, gender equality, tax increases on top incomes and wealth, a minimum pension for the low-paid, and limits on rents and energy prices, while at the same time continuing the turn to renewable energy.

Here too, the discourse strategy built on three elements:

Firstly, it was not disputed that the economic situation was relatively good. But it was explicitly interpreted as partly created by earlier policies of the SPD and to some extent also the Green Party (Agenda 2010, growth packages of the 2005–2009 grand coalition), and not as reflection of a particularly innovative economy. But above all they pointed to the country's social deficits (above all in the labour market). The idea was to confront the conservatives' rosy picture with a more differentiated perspective.

Secondly, the proposed tax increases were described as not only socially necessary but also economically sensi-

ble. The progressives spoke of an »equitable economy«. Above all, inadequate public investment in the fields of education, childcare and infrastructure was cited as a proof that state funding was insufficient.

Thirdly, they attempted to present the government as hesitant and paralysed (for example over the management of energy policy) and Chancellor Merkel as aimless.

### The discourse strategies in comparison

A glance at opinion polls shows that there were certainly majorities for particular progressive policies. Individual measures such as the minimum wage recorded stable approval rates of 70 to 80 per cent. But this was not enough as a mobilising factor.

One central problem for the challengers was the lack of a language for their own projects, a language capable of opposing a better present and future against the conservative »stay the course«. The progressive discourse focused on debating specific policy details rather than airing questions that would have sketched out the vision of a better society. The »big picture« was not visible enough.

The conservative camp, on the other hand, made a relatively good job of bringing the levels into harmony with one another. Argumentation on the policy level was but sparse, principally aimed at dismissing the opposition's proposals. Instead, considerably more weight was placed on the more fundamental level: »No experiments! Stay the course! Things are good!«, supported by a narrative that embedded the current situation in a political and historical context. The conservative camp was able to turn the crisis story of recent years into a coherent narrative, the progressive camp was not.

In the end the challengers lacked a political vision, an intellectual and communicative concept that bundled the many individual policy proposals. Certainly, the progressive camp was hampered also by the media landscape that largely turned its back on the progressive discourse. On the other side, a clear willingness to lend discursive support to the government's discourse was recognisable in the conservative media.

Additionally, there were clear problems with particular issues. On »the future of the euro«, a topic perceived by the public as threatening and therefore a priority, the progressive camp had no distinguishable proposals to offer. Indeed, discussion was actually avoided. SPD and Greens had in the past supported the government's most central rescue measures in the Bundestag and to that extent were hardly in a position to attack the Chancellor in this important field of competence. There was no alternative progressive discourse on European policy going beyond individual (and moreover contested or technical) measures of European economic and financial policy. On Europe, the political left succumbed to an almost unchallenged dominance of conservative »stability patriotism«.

Communicating the planned tax increases was also a complicated matter. While the conservatives stoked fears and insisted that tax revenues were higher than ever before, the opposition had to supply justifications on three levels. Firstly, it had to explain that 90 or 95 per cent of the population would be unaffected by the proposed increases. Secondly it had to show that tax increases were also in the interests of society as a whole. And thirdly, the steering effect of certain measures (such as phasing out the married couples tax allowance or introducing a financial transaction tax) also had to be argued for.

## Alternatives in small print

At no point during the election year was there a real mood for change, in the sense of a majority for a completely new government (and policies). While the work of the FDP in the coalition was not held in terribly high esteem, the CDU and CSU appeared as true mass parties. In all population groups (differentiated by age, education, gender and profession) with the exception of the unemployed, the Christian democrats were the strongest party in the opinion polls – and in the election itself.

Is this outcome in fact a confirmation that there was indeed »no alternative«, as Angela Merkel asserts? From our analytical perspective, this question must be answered with »yes«, in the sense that while there might have been clear micro-alternatives at the policy level, they did not ultimately come together to produce an »alternative« as a whole.

As indicated by the low turnout of 71.5 per cent, there was no central polarising and voter-mobilising issue in the campaign. In published opinion and in the perception of large parts of the population, the country's situation was good and the government camp's »stay the course« message resonated. The conservative discourse strategy avoided serious debates over concrete issues, tending instead to make the other side defend its policy proposals, especially on tax reform. Since 2010, the conservative camp had succeeded in regaining discursive sovereignty over the economic crisis, interpreting it as an »external threat« from »debt-laden countries«. Angela Merkel personally was regarded as a guarantor of economic stability, while one could not really know what her SPD challenger stood for exactly. The response of SPD and Green Party to the failures of financial capitalism was too technical. There was no strategy for a real ideological and programmatic turnaround of the kind seen in the crises of the 1930s, when Keynesianism became established, or in the 1970s, when the neo-liberal turn was instituted. Although the spell of economic liberalism has been broken in recent years, that by no means leads automatically to the dominance of a progressive perspective. The conservatives were still able to tell the good old stability story of hard currency and economic success, which they tied to the »social market economy« of which the CDU regards itself as the inventor. In this context, the progressive manifestos remained stuck in the small print and were not communicable as credible alternatives.

This paper is a condensed version of a longer analysis of the election campaign soon to be published.

## Angela Merkel, Just to be on the Safe Side

Albrecht von Lucke

The country has never seen an election campaign like this. A campaign that never got off the ground. Why? Because the opposition has not even remotely succeeded to put its stamp on it.

According to a poll by the public television channel ARD, 52 percent of Germans are actually quite happy with the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition. That is the highest proportion ever measured in Deutschlandtrend, a poll conducted since 1997. Having said that, we are experiencing an astonishing new polarity this year: not between different political camps, but between the general public and intellectuals, with the latter lambasting the new stolid complacency into which they believe people have sunk. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk even speaks of a »lethargocracy«, while the journalist and publisher of the left liberal weekly *Freitag*, Jakob Augstein, loudly denounces »the coalition of the foolish that the people have formed with their chancellor, hoping that if they keep their heads down and eyes shut everything will somehow pass«.

When the country's leading minds, the self-proclaimed guardians of reason, start launching these kinds of tirades at the public, scepticism is in order. Could it be that the analysis of the intellectual top ten thousand is wide of the mark and the situation of the German people is actually quite different? To say that nothing is happening in this country is certainly to grotesquely misjudge the situation. Yet this is what the SPD's candidate for chancellor is doing when he rails against a chancellor who »asks for nothing and demands nothing«, and true to his party's »calling a spade a spade« election campaign chooses the slogan: »More PS [horsepower]! Movement instead of Inertia«. PS also happen to be Peer Steinbrück's initials, but sounding off in this way about the need for movement could not have failed more spectacularly to address people's needs. After all, what have Germans been experiencing for the past ten years, if not permanent change and the definitive end of the old Bonn Republic?

## The Loss of Certainties as a Permanent State of Affairs

It all began with 9/11, the terrorist attacks of 2001. This was followed by Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 policies, which in millions of people triggered a fear of the Hartz IV welfare reforms that included drastic cuts in unemployment benefits. The old upwardly mobile society became a downwardly mobile one, with the boom in soup kitchens being a constant reminder of how quickly one can fall through all the safety nets. After all, the crisis triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers put an end to the faith of the middle classes in inflation-proof savings. What followed was a mood of permanent uncertainty. The sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer has rightly criticised the past decade as having »removed the safety catch on living conditions«.

With angst riding high, security becomes the non plus ultra. Who would blame the man in the street for worrying primarily about preserving his status and property? Or for being all too willing to fall into the arms of »mummy«, as Angela Merkel has been so aptly nicknamed.

Who, for that matter, would blame Angela Merkel for responding all too readily to people's longing for stability and social certainty and spreading her arms wide? Especially after learning in the 2005 election campaign how quickly one can stumble by being too radical about tax reform. Nowadays she prefers to follow Konrad Adenauer's mantra of »No experiments«.

## No Experiments: Security Writ Large

One thing is certain: given the increasing global instability, security will remain the big issue for some years to come, probably well ahead of social justice. That, however, is nothing new in the history of the Federal Republic. On the contrary, as the historian Eckart Conze has shown, people's »longing for security« has always been a key to political success, all the way from Adenauer to Merkel. Even the brief phase of experimentation in both foreign

and domestic policy under Willy Brandt (with slogans like »change through rapprochement« and »let's risk more democracy«) was no exception. Rather, after the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, coexistence with the Soviet Union and the GDR – called for as early as 1963 by John F. Kennedy and thereafter by Willy Brandt – in fact seemed a more secure route to go than the tough confrontational style of the Cold Warriors. Even the last election won by the SPD after 9/11 was dominated by security worries. In his government declaration of 2002 Gerhard Schröder even defined security as »a basic civil right«. A yearning for security is a *quintessential element of the pan-German* disposition. »Without security you have nothing« is deeply ingrained in the German mentality – as a lesson learned from the disastrous twentieth century, but also as a hangover from much older authoritarian traditions that survived the revolts of 1968. Hence, there is little point in banging on about the rampant lack of interest in the rule of law and freedom of opinion in the era of the NSA. Any party of the Left that wants to come into government will definitely need to factor in the population's desire for security.

As a matter of fact, the Left could learn a lot from Angela Merkel. Her incredibly simple slogan: »An election campaign is about things that interest people« definitely hits the mark. And what interests people these days is not so much fear of eavesdropping intelligence services and a »deep state« as worries about social status. Indeed, Merkel has mostly played it safe over the past four years. Her primary goal is to adapt as closely as possible to the zeitgeist of the moment and hence render any opposition superfluous. On her way to creating a mainstream party of a new type and in the absence of strong convictions of her own, Merkel has absorbed anything and everything capable of gaining majority support, from the phasing-out of nuclear power to a legal minimum wage and the capping of rents. The irony of history is that after four years of a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition, Germany is a considerably more colourful place than it used to be. Having introduced everything from universal day-care to gay marriage, the coalition has managed to establish the sort of world the SPD and the Greens envisaged.

Merkel sums up four years of CDU/CSU-FDP by saying: »Our country's position is a good one. That is to the people's credit.« And the voters show their gratitude by giving her sensational popularity ratings. At the end of a legislative period marked by enormous uncer-

tainty – from the euro crisis to Fukushima to the floods of German rivers – Angela Merkel, the most powerful woman in Europe, seems to be the last bastion of security in Germany and the guarantor of German prosperity. The central message of the entire CDU-CSU election campaign is therefore incredibly simple: Angela Merkel must remain chancellor.

## SPD: Politics of Uncertainty

The opposition has nothing to counter this. The SPD and particularly its »PS« candidate Peer Steinbrück have proved utterly helpless when it comes to offering the electorate the security it hankers after – for three reasons.

First of all, Steinbrück is not in a position to offer plausible political alternatives. Especially not with respect to the central issue of the euro crisis and Merkel's promise to shore up the German island of prosperity. Instead of going on the offensive and attacking the glaring shortcomings of Merkel's austerity policy, an increasingly panicky Steinbrück has flitted from one new issue to another (from rent controls to the NSA), all of them regularly turning out to be damp squibs.

Secondly, the SPD lacks a plausible alternative for a government or a coalition. During the campaign it became ever more certain it would not win enough votes to be able to form a coalition with the Greens. In other words, the SPD strategy of forming a coalition government without the left-wing Die Linke (which it wanted to push back below the five-percent hurdle) has failed.

This leads to the third point, namely, that the SPD does not even have a real candidate for chancellor. Having rejected the option of a SPD-Linke-Green coalition, Peer Steinbrück is clearly not going to become chancellor. And since Steinbrück has already rather pompously declared that he does not wish to serve under Angela Merkel again, the SPD's candidate turns out to be a complete *lame duck* and a »zero option«.

So what remains of the »PS« election campaign? No issues, no coalition, no candidate for chancellor – that doesn't leave much. The SPD is conducting an election campaign designed to undermine the voters' sense of security. As a consequence, the only issue to be decided on 22 September will be whether the CDU/CSU-FDP

government will once again be confirmed in office, or whether Angela Merkel will remain chancellor in some other constellation such as CDU/CSU-SPD or CDU/CSU-Greens – a situation that until recently no one could have imagined.

Jürgen Habermas is therefore absolutely right when, unlike Augstein and Sloterdijk, he speaks not of a failure of the electorate but of a »historic failure of the political elites«. In reality, one ought to be more specific and speak of a failure of the opposition. For that – the failure of the entire Left in the face of Merkel's »power physics« – is what really lies behind the liberal intellectual elite's haranguing of the public. The narcissistic injury is deflected by castigating a population that supposedly fails to understand what is really necessary. What we are seeing are intellectuals who are doubly out of touch – out of touch with the population, but also out of touch with politics per se. Some of them are even of the opinion that it would be better not to vote at all. The impossibility of distinguishing between the parties, so the argument goes, no longer allows one to choose the lesser evil. This articulates the age-old aversion of intellectuals to the dirty business of politics. At the same time, the new-old denigrators of politics have most certainly been taken in by the chancellor's tremendous adaptability. Because this

is exactly Merkel's recipe for success: By making it look as if there were no differences between parties she takes the wind out of her opponents' sails.

If the great leveller once again manages to pull it off – and there is everything to suggest that she will – this would be fatal for two main reasons. Firstly, German history has taught us, from Bismarck to Merkel, that conservative parties in Germany are only as socially oriented as strong parties of the Left force them to be. Secondly, the absence of real differences is in fact a fallacy. After all, while the conservative parties are promising tax reductions, the Greens, Die Linke, and to a lesser extent the SPD are calling for higher taxes and for a stronger role for the state. For the intellectuals who are now so contemptuous of elections this is apparently no longer relevant. The lack of a »grand alternative« means they are allowing themselves the luxury of not even bothering to read the small print of the party manifestos, contributing in no small way to the oft-lamented post-democratic conditions.

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## Focusing on the NSA was an Error: *Interview with Oskar Niedermayer*

*In discussion with Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte (NG/FH), Berlin-based political scientist Oskar Niedermayer analyses the Social Democratic Party's election campaign, the weakness of the Green Party and the preconditions for a coalition with the Left Party.*

*NG/FH:* The Free Democratic Party (FDP) is out of the German Bundestag with just 4.8 per cent of the vote, while the new Alternative for Germany (AfD) achieved almost the same result, 4.7 per cent. Are these merely swings that tell us little about where the party system is really heading?

*Oskar Niedermayer:* The FDP result is a historic turning-point from which the party will have difficulty recovering, because it has squandered the voters' trust, and because the Bundestag was only the last of a line of falling dominoes. It had already suffered a poor showing in a number of state elections and been ejected from state parliaments. And its regional base has crumbled too. On top of that, competition from the Green Party in the field of civil rights sector is now compounded by competition on economic liberalism from the Alternative for Germany. A second turning-point is that the discussion about a decline or even the end of the mass parties has been shown to be nonsense by the good results of the Christian democratic parties.

*NG/FH:* Thinking about the Alternative for Germany, if we assume that the euro crisis is going to rumble on for years – does the AfD have the potential to enter the next Bundestag and the next European Parliament? After all, there are eurosceptical parties in almost every other European country.

*Niedermayer:* The European elections next year play into the hands of the Alternative for Germany. Firstly, the overarching issue of the euro crisis will play a much larger role than in the recent Bundestag elections. And secondly, we will no longer have a 5 per cent hurdle for the European elections, which naturally increases the AfD's chances. But if it is to play a role in the party-political system, the AfD will have to clearly and unambiguously disassociate itself from the right-wing margins. If it becomes tarred with the stigma of right-wing populism, respectable conservatives will not support it. We have seen that again and again. Over the years there have been some ten attempts to establish a party appealing to

conservative voters to the right of Christian democracy. They always failed because they ended up too close to the right-wing margins, or were in fact right-wing populists. If the AfD can avoid that, if it can become both a socially conservative alternative to Christian democracy and a free-market alternative to the Free Democratic Party, then I see a chance of it becoming established in the medium term.

*NG/FH:* The SPD and the Green Party seriously failed to exploit their full electoral potential. What were the reasons?

*Niedermayer:* With the Green Party I see a clear downward spiral stemming from the cumulative effect of three factors. First of all, the situation for the Green Party was by no means as good as they believed. During the last parliament the Greens had some good polling figures, with two periods where they were recording up to 25 per cent. That already had some of my colleagues discussing whether they might not become a new mass party. I always thought that was nonsense, because the polling hype clearly occurred only at points where the public discussion was dominated by the Green Party's core issue, environmental policy. But those figures never lasted, they settled around 12 per cent. That would actually have been a slight improvement on their Bundestag result of 2009, but as I say only to a small extent and not into the realms of a mass party. But then three things happened: Firstly, in the early phase of the campaign the Green Party failed to score points on their birthright issue, namely environmental policy. Instead they adopted a tax programme that placed them in competition with the Left Party and the SPD. The Green Party attempted to assert competence here, but the voters were having none of it. There was nothing to be gained with this issue. Even if it had been true that their tax proposals would have left only 10 per cent of households worse off, the problem was that 17.5 per cent of voters in those households actually vote Green, according to a DIW study. So a good proportion of their own clientele would have been affected by their tax plans.

The second mistake was the story with the »veggie day«, which was actually well-intentioned. They wanted to raise awareness about a problem, but what transpired in communication was that the Greens were puffing themselves up yet again as the party of prohibitions. It should have been foreseeable that the discussion would proceed as it did.

The third point is the treatment of the paedophile past of parts of the Green Party. The issue should have dealt with much earlier, to avoid it spilling over into the election campaign. The paedophile question in itself would have not been problematic, given that it is a quarter of a century old. But it was another factor sullyng the Green Party's halo of moral superiority. It was the cumulative effect of these three stories that created the downward spiral.

*NG/FH:* And the SPD?

*Niedermayer:* I think that the SPD made a big mistake at the beginning of the campaign. One could speculate forever about whether the candidate fitted the programme or maybe the programme was too left-wing for the candidate. But there were no other candidates available. The potential alternatives were unwilling or unable to stand. That said, the selection of Peer Steinbrück was extremely unprofessional. His hasty nomination meant that the party went into the campaign relatively unprepared. There was no strategy and no proper team of advisers. All that had to be assembled afterwards. And then there were mistakes made by the candidate, which in themselves were trivialities. But Steinbrück should have known that the media would scrutinise his every word. And once the media have tasted blood once or twice, they pounce on any word that could be misinterpreted. Some of the mistakes that occurred were ones that advisers should have prevented.

*NG/FH:* What role was played by the public perception of differences between Steinbrück's image and the manifesto? Was Steinbrück able to credibly embody the essence of the SPD programme?

*Niedermayer:* I would not make too much of the differences, because they did not feature so prominently in the public discussion. In fact, whenever the topic was social justice, Steinbrück was good, for example in the televised debate. Whenever social justice was the issue his figures

were good. In the polls his figures were close to Merkel's before and shortly after his nomination, which was after the manifesto came out. That means that the contradiction was not perceived so sharply by the electorate. Where Steinbrück collapsed in the public eye was the discussion over his lecture fees. That is a matter that is more concrete and accessible for the voters. Someone who receives €20,000 for a two-hour talk clearly has a credibility problem arguing for social justice. I think that the contradiction was pinned more closely to that story than in abstract terms to the manifesto.

*NG/FH:* Those impressions stick?

*Niedermayer:* Because the story was concretely attached to the candidate, it did much more harm than the SPD's manifesto. But in my opinion one of the SPD's biggest mistakes in the election campaign was to make the NSA data scandal a central issue. After three weeks at the latest they should have noticed that it did not interest the electorate. So the SPD wasted two months of the campaign completely off-topic. Not until the first televised debate did they back the right horse, with the central social democratic concern of social justice. But by then, I think, it was already too late.

People always claim that the Christian Democratic Union did not conduct a proper election campaign. That is not true. The CDU conducted an outstanding campaign. The Christian democratic parties took care of everything considered important by communication theory and electoral research. Rather than using text posters on a large scale, the CDU worked with images, they communicated feelings – and visual posters simply touch the emotions much better than text does. The Christian democratic parties focused on their core brand from the outset: »Germany is doing well economically and if that is to continue you have to vote for us again!« That was a message that built on the underlying basic mood of the overwhelming majority.

*NG/FH:* If the SPD had suggested before this election that it would, in the case of a result not allowing the aspired SPD-Green government, consider a coalition including the Left Party, would the three centre-left parties have gained the theoretical majority they have now? What will happen if the SPD comes to terms with the idea of a coalition with the Left Party? Will support for the SPD change significantly if it now announces: »We are form-

ing a grand coalition with the Christian democrats, but at the same time starting to be more open towards the Left Party«? Would the SPD gain or lose votes overall?

*Niedermayer:* The SPD/Green coalition has turned out to be insufficient from the power perspective. So you have to think about where to go from here. I believe that in the medium term the three left parties will establish themselves as a camp; politically they are not one yet. I am convinced that if the SPD had announced before the election that it would consider, if necessary, a three-party coalition including the Left Party, it would have scuppered the SPD and the Green Party too. The problem here is not the policy differences between the SPD and the Left Party. In social, financial and labour market policy – although not in foreign policy – these are trivialities that could certainly be resolved through compromise. The fundamental reason is that parts of the officials, members and voters of the SPD and the Green Party do yet not regard the Left Party as a normal democratic party with which one can form a coalition at the national level. This rejection is much more fundamental than if I say they cannot come together because the Left Party rejects NATO.

*NGFH:* What would have to happen at the real and symbolic levels in order for such a coalition to be able to succeed?

*Niedermayer:* As far as the Left Party is concerned, it needs to drop its insistence on relativising the past. Instead it should quite simply state that it distances itself from its communist past. The other point is that the party would need to deal differently with individuals who espouse undemocratic views. To date such figures have been tolerated. There has been no debate with them at all on the grounds that the Left Party is a democratic party now and must therefore tolerate different opinions and cannot simply exclude such people. But one has to debate with them internally. As long as the Left Party consists of a least two parties and factionalism is strongly rooted, that will be unrealistic.

*NG/FH:* Is there any chance that the arithmetical majority as it currently exists in parliament would be sustained if there were clear pro-coalition statements from SPD, Green Party and Left Party?

*Niedermayer:* Yes, but under two conditions: Firstly, the SPD would have to change its attitude towards the Left Party and signalise a greater willingness to compromise. Secondly, a future Left Party group in the Bundestag would have to be made up overwhelmingly of pragmatists, which in the present parliament is certainly not the case. The SPD would have to find points of common ground, also in the parliamentary work. If a grand coalition comes about, one can naturally not do that through official channels. But in working groups and existing relationships ways to promote shared interests in a pragmatic manner can be explored. It would also make sense to try out such a coalition in practice in one of the western federal states. Historically, new coalition options have always first been tested at the regional level. In the case of the Left Party one could then demonstrate to voters that such a coalition can work outside the eastern states. The message would be that the Left Party is willing to compromise, capable of meaningful political work, and that such a coalition did not fall apart again straight away. Real experience would then dispel any fundamental doubts.

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## How the East was lost

Thomas Kralinski

It is not quite true to say that the whole of eastern Germany is black. There is still a red spot in the middle. The area from Rathenow through Brandenburg on the Havel to the Fläming is the sole constituency won by the SPD in eastern Germany in the 2013 election. Frank-Walter Steinmeier rescued the honour of the eastern German SPD there, despite his margin of victory being only 300 votes.

Eleven years ago the map of constituency gains looked quite different. Apart from a couple of black spots in the east of Saxony and in the north-east of Mecklenburg-Pomerania the electoral map of the »new« regions was red. Out of 58 eastern constituencies the SPD won 40, the CDU 16 and the PDS (now Left Party) two.

After the smoke of the Bundestag election of 2013 has cleared, the contours of a transformed electoral landscape in the east may be discerned. The CDU – as at the beginning of the 1990s – has developed into the strongest force. In eastern Germany, it achieved 37 per cent, a good result. The SPD, by contrast, managed to get a share of above 20 per cent only in Brandenburg and Berlin; in the other states they remained significantly lower, sometimes dropping to third behind CDU and the Left Party. The latter, in turn, did not come through unscathed, losing 5 percentage points. Even though the Left Party's attribution of competence on social issues remains high, it could be the case that the shrinkage in the east indicates that this eastern German party is losing its ability to bind people together.

Since 2011 the Liberals had already vanished from three eastern German regional parliaments and in the Bundestag election the FDP managed to get only 2.9 per cent there. Their conspicuous weakness in the east was ultimately the reason why the FDP was driven out of the Bundestag. Although the Greens are now present in all eastern German states, it was only in Berlin that their result exceeded 5 per cent. By contrast, the rise of the eurosceptical »Alternative für Deutschland« (Alternative for Germany) is astonishing. The »founders« of the AfD themselves assumed that the decisive votes for this newly

established party would come from southern Germany. However, it was precisely there that it fell below the five-per cent hurdle, while in the eastern German states the AfD consistently achieved five to six per cent. The result also shows that there is still potential for populist radical movements. Together AfD and the various right-wing radical parties gained a good 10 per cent of the vote.

### Without Communication and Issues for the East

So what went wrong in 2013 for the SPD in East Germany? Five points suggest themselves.

#### First: Party Programme and Communication

When it was elaborating its election manifesto, the SPD discussed whether a separate »chapter on eastern Germany« was still necessary. After two decades of German unity, the decision was made to look at the »eastern« aspect of particular issues when treating more generally on the topic, without a separate chapter for the east. This decision might have been right. It was, however, as incomprehensible as it was inexcusable that the SPD, for the first time since reunification, campaigned without a separate line of communication for the east. Eastern Germany may no longer be *fundamentally* different, but there remain a separate political culture and a different set of problems than in the west. It was, for example, simply not communicated that the SPD is the only party which has come up with a viable way of bringing the eastern German pensions to the western level. Instead, the SPD put up posters in eastern Germany promising more day-care places. They may be scarce in western Frankfurt am Main, but they are nothing of the kind in eastern Frankfurt an der Oder.

#### Second: Leaders

The SPD now lacks a recognisable eastern German face. After the departure of Manfred Stolpe, Matthias Platzeck and Wolfgang Thierse figures are lacking whom people could get behind and whom they could identify with. The CDU, by contrast, has Angela Merkel and the Left Party

has Gregor Gysi. That does not mean that the leading candidate has to come from the east. Gerhard Schröder was strong in the east even though his career was purely »western« – but he could speak to people in their own language and had the common touch when needed.

#### Third: Steinbrück's Great Faux Pas

Precisely in this context it was an absolutely crazy idea that Peer Steinbrück attacked chancellor Merkel by referring to her eastern German origin. The majority of people are not particularly interested in politics, but everyone in the east picked up on *this*. And it unsettled, even profoundly frustrated SPD election campaigners in the east. The subsequent – and in any case incomprehensible – attempts by Steinbrück to explain it away were not able to change anything. From this point at the latest, the SPD in the east could have been saved only by a massive issues-based campaign – but that is exactly what remained undone. In the end eastern Germans did not know what the SPD stands for – apart from the fact they are less radical than the Left Party.

#### Fourth: Over the Heads of Core Constituencies

Thus the SPD performed well below its potential in the east precisely in relation to its core constituencies: workers, pensioners and women. Among workers the Social Democrats in the west achieved 30 per cent, but in the east a mere 16 per cent. Among the over 60s in the western states they also managed 30 per cent, but only 21 per cent in the new states. Women in particular have deserted the SPD, especially younger women. In the 2005 elections, 32 per cent of women voted SPD and only 25 per cent for the CDU, already led by Angela Merkel. Eight years later the figure had fallen to only 18 per cent for the SPD (and had risen to 41 per cent for the CDU). Within only two election periods a lead of 7 per cent had thus been converted into a 23 per cent deficit. Yet, eastern German women are a constituency that needs every euro, that most vehemently rejects stay-at-home allowances for mothers of pre-school children (so-called »*Betreuungsgeld*«) and who would have responded very positively, for example, to free child care places and pension convergence with western Germany. The SPD had something to offer to single mothers who are particularly numerous in the east – but it did not put anything of that in the shop window.

#### Fifth: The Forgotten Middle

Finally, in its campaign the SPD simply forgot to offer anything to the (eastern German) centre of society. That is almost unforgivable for a centrist party, because a broad middle of eastern German society does exist. In the past ten years eastern Germany has experienced something like economic stability, albeit at a low level. Unemployment has halved (!), something almost unprecedented in Europe. Furthermore, the first of those who left eastern Germany in the 1990s have begun to return. Wages are still low and confidence is not overflowing, but in recent years things are getting better. Yet, the SPD has missed the chance to make headway with the upwardly mobile in eastern Germany and to offer them further prospects. The old success model of »innovation *and* justice« has become particularly important for the SPD in eastern Germany. Thanks to its stable economy, eastern Germany has the chance to become a place of an upwardly mobile population. How social mobility can be organised, that is the key question which the SPD has to address in eastern Germany (but not only there).

### Deficient Party Structures

On top of that, if the SPD wants to win elections in Germany again, it needs to find an answer to the limited party structures in the east. In all eastern German states together there are only as many card-carrying Social Democrats as in tiny Saarland. Nothing much about this structure will change fundamentally. Precisely for that reason election campaigns in the east require exceptional efforts, in particular because daily newspapers reach only a quarter of households. »Mouth to mouth« instead of mass media communication may be basically a good idea for campaigning in a hostile media environment – but it does not have a chance if members are thin on the ground. The SPD's membership in the eastern German states lies at between 0.1 and 0.3 per cent of those entitled to vote, and at between 0.4 per cent and 2.3 per cent in western Germany. The percentage of the electorate with SPD membership is ten times bigger in western Germany than in eastern Germany. For that reason alone the failure to conduct a separate eastern German campaign in the Bundestag election was fatal.

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## Technical Failure

Frank Stauss

Long before a single poster was printed the SPD election campaign was over, the candidate compromised and frustrated, the grassroots demoralised – and the chancellor lost. How in heaven's name did that happen?

A plane crash is never due to a single cause. Many small technical problems – an iced-up speedometer, malfunctioning of several controls at the same time and panic – mess things up and lead to unavoidable catastrophe. External weather conditions are almost never the cause of accidents. They merely allow existing faults to run their terrible course under high pressure.

The SPD election campaign for 2013 nosedived without any external assistance. It didn't need an opponent or any political challenges to founder on. Beset by a multitude of minor defects it was quite capable all on its own of breaking up under the enormous pressure of a parliamentary election. The contest for the chancellorship is a staggeringly severe test. The key actors are under constant stress and that requires a precise strategy, an ability to think on one's feet and a team whose members trust one another implicitly. Even in the dead of night a potentially dangerous tweet has to be dealt with and measures taken. Fires have to be put out before they even start. In order to achieve that, responsibilities have to be crystal clear. But the SPD has a structural problem right here, which has nothing to do with the actors concerned.

### A Badly Designed Party

Up to the end of 1999 the organisation of the SPD's election campaigns lay in the hands of the executive director, who answered to the party executive. The post of general secretary was created, first, for Franz Müntefering, because Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had to take over as party chairman when Oskar Lafontaine jumped ship and needed someone he could trust at party headquarters. However, Müntefering did not want to resume the post of executive director, which he had already held. Rather he wanted more autonomy and legitimacy. In other words, the post of general secretary was tailor-made for a man

who enjoyed the implicit trust of the party chairman and, besides that, considered the organisation of power to be the decisive factor between victory and defeat. Furthermore, in the persons of Matthias Machnig, Karl-Josef Wasserhovel and Michael Donnermeyer, he had gathered a talented team around him. Since then there has been a general secretary who is elected by the national party conference and forms his own power centre. This power centre becomes particularly important when the party is in opposition because it is the third most visible role at national level, after the party chairman and chairman of the parliamentary group. Thus it is subject to the balance of power within the party and competing forces.

There are two conditions that a general secretary does not have to meet: he or she does not need either the trust of the party chairman or election experience. It is good if one has both, but it isn't part of the job description. Today the SPD regards the post of general secretary no longer as a supportive, but rather as a supervisory office alongside the party chair. That's all well and good. But it poses a problem. That is because there are circumstances in which the general secretary and the party chair do not see eye to eye, leading to the emergence of rival camps. Then a climate of mistrust and mutual paralysis can arise in a party headquarters whose sole purpose is to organise power for the party.

### No Preventive Strategy

In an already unstable situation new actors coming on the scene can make things worse. For example, if a candidate for the chancellorship enters the game lacking his own power base and an experienced team – and furthermore, at a time when clearly no one expected it. That has nothing to do with those involved. This state of affairs is due to a faulty design that can be overcome only if, by chance, everyone is singing from the same hymn-sheet. In politics, that is rare indeed. And when it comes to the stress-test of a parliamentary election that kind of structure is bound to fail – and since the departure of Schröder and Müntefering that's exactly what has happened.

Since July 2011 Peer Steinbrück, together with Frank-Walter Steinmeier (chairman of the SPD's parliamentary group) and Sigmar Gabriel (SPD party chairman), has formed the new »Troika«, from which the candidate for chancellor was to be nominated in January 2013 after the election in Lower Saxony. Of the three, Peer Steinbrück, an ordinary MP, was the only one without a substantial staff around him. At party headquarters none of the three possible candidatures was systematically prepared because intensive preoccupation with any one of them would immediately have given rise to speculation that the decision was already sewn up. Thus when Peer Steinbrück was hastily announced as candidate for chancellor on 28 September 2012 there was no roadmap for his candidacy, no established team, no media roll-out for the coming days and, above all, no strategy. All there was was a campaign that could more or less fit any one of the candidates – in other words, one that didn't really fit any of them. The announcement was premature but it had long been clear that it would be one of the three. Especially for the most precariously placed candidate there was an urgent need to clear up a number of important issues in advance. It was clear that he would be labelled by the left as the »Agenda 2010« candidate and that an inquisitive media would be all over any sources of additional income he might have in order to split SPD support. Nevertheless, nothing was done in advance to address these weak points and no preventive strategy put in place.

At exactly this point the catastrophe took its course with a deadly precision that would lead to disaster. Because without these initial mistakes there would have been no weeks of debate on lecture fees and thus no interview on the chancellor's salary and consequently no media outcry on the price of a bottle of Pinot Grigio, no fuss about clowns and Berlusconi – and at the end of the day no »middle finger«.<sup>3</sup> This can be dismissed as something that nothing can be done about any more, under the heading »shoulda, woulda, coulda« (»*Hätte, hätte, Fahrradkette*«). But it is important to note that something definitely can be done about it. Indeed, that something *must* be done about it. Because it will all happen again – in four years' time, at the latest. The SPD's capacity to organise is in permanent jeopardy if the centre of its power is not set up properly. Long before any

posters were printed the campaign was already over, the candidate permanently compromised and frustrated, the party demoralised and the chancellorship lost.

There was no more room for politicking in this campaign. The real task of the candidate, to deliver to the party the urgently needed voters from the centre, had become impossible. There was no longer any question of putting the party's own issues on the agenda or even of putting the government on the ropes. The only option was damage limitation. Shortly before the crash the pilot was still able to pull up and to demonstrate his flying skills. Thus he was still able to manage a crash landing. But it was a catastrophe all the same. In June 2012 Merkel's coalition was down to just 39 per cent in the opinion polls, while a possible coalition between the SPD and the Greens stood at 45 per cent. The distance between the SPD and the CDU/CSU was only two points. How, then, was it possible that 15 months later the CDU/CSU was able to cross the finish line with an incredible 15.8 per cent margin, the biggest lead over the SPD since 1957? There is no one reason.

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3. This part refers to several public statements and a picture of Peer Steinbrück that provoked public debate and discussion.

## PART TWO: CONSEQUENCES OF THE ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF THE SPD

### No Alternative to a Grand Coalition?

Frank Decker and Eckard Jesse

The Federal Republic of Germany is not only a multi-party democracy, but also a coalition-based democracy. Every Bundestag election thus far has been followed by a coalition, even in 1957, when the CDU had won an absolute majority. Only in 1960/61 did the CDU/CSU govern alone. In the current election, no one had expected it, but an absolute majority lay in reach for the CDU/CSU, even though it had won »only« 41.5 per cent of the votes. The reason: 15.7 per cent of the votes had gone to waste because they had been cast for parties that failed to reach the 5 per cent threshold.

In the run-up to the Bundestag election a red-green coalition became arithmetically unrealistic, a red-red-green one was politically so. By contrast, there were three realistic alliances, all with Angela Merkel as chancellor: black-yellow, black-red and black-green. The first option evaporated when the FDP fell at the 5-per cent hurdle. Thus the prospect was raised of an alliance across the political divide because a minority government was as much out of the question as a new election. Alliances across the political divide are always difficult, however: on one hand, because of the discontent among one's own supporters and on the other hand, because of the problems involved in reconciling different positions in government policy.

The victory of the CDU/CSU is increasingly proving to be a pyrrhic one. Its very strength is also a weakness. On one hand, it lacks a »natural« coalition partner, in the form of the Liberals, and on the other hand, the Social Democrats and the Greens are not thrilled by the perspective of »procuring a majority« for the CDU/CSU – despite the unexpectedly poor election results which demonstrate their weakness. In the election, the role of opposition party did not pay dividends: the SPD was able to improve its worst result in the history of the Federal Republic – 23 per cent in 2009 – by only 2.7 percentage points. The Greens even lost 2.3 percentage points. The three »left-wing« parties lost 3 percentage points overall,

while the three »centre-right« parties (if one includes the Alternative für Deutschland) gained 2.6 percentage points. In terms of seats, however, the opposite was true: the »centre-right« majority at the polls turned into a »left-wing« majority in parliament.

### How the Junior Partner, Too, Can Benefit

To be sure, the SPD and the Greens are making a fuss, for various reasons, over joining a coalition with the CDU. Tactics are only one dimension. The other is that the SPD and the Greens have fundamental reservations.

For the Social Democrats, the trauma of the last grand coalition – from which they emerged with a double-digit loss of votes – continues to exert its effects. However, it is too simplistic – even autosuggestive – to blame this, almost mechanically, on the grand coalition.

Empirical examinations of previous grand coalitions at federal and *Land* level show that it by no means always benefits the larger partner. Just as the SPD was able to switch from the junior role in the grand coalition to lead a coalition with the FDP in 1969, it was capable of displacing the CDU as leading government party in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (1998) and Berlin (2001), both times with the help of the PDS. Only where it lagged well behind the CDU – as in Baden-Württemberg (1996), Thuringen (1999) and Saxony (2009) – did it have to switch to the opposition benches after a period in government.

These examples underscore the importance of being able to form a coalition. The poor showing of the SPD in the recent Bundestag election was also due to the fact that it had little prospect of attaining power. According to opinion polls, the red-green coalition it proposed never got near attaining a majority. Social Democrats and Greens had allowed themselves to be deluded by their successes in the federal states that comprised the old

West Germany, in which, thanks to the usual by-election effect and the falling back of the Left Party they had been able to oust four CDU/FDP-governments (Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Schleswig-Holstein and Lower Saxony). It was foreseeable that this scenario could not be transferred to the national level. The Social Democrats thus found themselves in the same situation as in 2009: they were not playing to win, but only for a place.

## What a Grand Coalition Could Achieve

The SPD owed its election gains mainly to the weakness of the Greens and the Left, from whom it gained a total of 920,000 votes. It gained only slightly, with 140,000 votes, from the centre-right camp. The main reason for the party's poor result was the failure to mobilise non-voters. Voters who en masse had turned their backs on the SPD in 2009 also stayed at home this time around or switched to the CDU/CSU; the latter was ultimately able to bring on board three times as many previous non-voters as the SPD (1,130,000 as against 360,000).

Opinion polls show that SPD supporters by no means reject a grand coalition; the number of backers, at around two-thirds, is more or less the same as among CDU/CSU supporters. This is not entirely consistent with the impression being peddled by leading SPD politicians that the grassroots are overwhelmingly opposed to a grand coalition. This opposition can easily be explained, however: party officials are more sceptical because of the large lead enjoyed by the CDU/CSU (15.8 per cent).

The fact that the reservations come primarily from regions in which the SPD is in power is due not only to the fear of defeat in upcoming municipal and federal-state elections. The conflict of interest between regional party organisations and the national SPD also plays a role. For the former, it would presumably be more comfortable to remain in opposition in the federal government: in that case, the SPD-governed *Länder*, with their majority in the Second Chamber, the Bundesrat, could go up against the CDU/CSU-led federal government as a tightly-knit phalanx. They would be able to put pressure on it to increase funding to the *Länder*. If the SPD were in a grand coalition, however, the leading lights from the *Länder* would have to reach agreement with the national party and SPD-appointed ministers, who in their official

capacity would be obliged automatically to privilege the national interest.

Shifting from the party or internal party perspective to that of the interest of the state as a whole there is a lot to be said in favour of a grand coalition, especially with regard to federalism. Various factors, such as the introduction of a constitutional debt ceiling and the calling into question of the current financial equalisation system by the rich southern *Länder*, require a fundamental overhaul of the federal fiscal system. Furthermore, a grand coalition could abolish the proscription of cooperation between national and regional institutions in the field of education that the former grand coalition had introduced in 2006.

By contrast, the harm inflicted on democracy by a grand coalition is evident. The CDU/CSU and the SPD together would control four-fifths of the seats in the Bundestag. The lack of heft of the two remaining opposition parties would deprive them of the ability to exercise substantial supervisory rights, such as the appointment of committees of inquiry or judicial reviews. A grand coalition would demonstrate political noblesse by reducing the threshold for that from 25 per cent to 20 per cent. Apart from that, a coalition of the two major parties should remain an exception.

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## SPD – Time for a New Strategy

Thomas Meyer

The alternatives that remain after the SPD's sorry election result, and the associated risks, have been thoroughly raked over in the media, and even more so within the party itself. Nonetheless, a stampede carrying all before it seems to be heading for a grand coalition with the Christian democrats. And where else could it go? Yet nobody has forgotten how badly it ended last time, despite the respectable achievements of social democratic ministers. The party and its voters were not impressed by lists of successes, quite the contrary. And now, further weakened by a poor election result that lags well behind that of the unchosen partner, things are supposed to turn out better? Hardly conceivable. But what choice is there? For the moment not much. Precisely for that reason, in the light of such experiences, we should not forget that taking such a step today will symbolically and tangibly shape the future chances for social democracy – not only at the next elections but for the coming decade. So what does the 22 September result mean for the SPD?

### Tricky situation

*Firstly:* There is a German majority left of the CDU/CSU, and this would probably still remain the case if certain »centre-right« parties cleared the five percent hurdle next time.

*Secondly:* For debatable reasons, the SPD cannot make use of this virtual majority. In the eyes of the voters this robs the party of its power perspective.

*Thirdly:* Consolidation of a *middle class democracy* leaving out the bottom quarter further hampers the chances of centre-left success.

*Fourthly:* The SPD came nowhere near fully realising its electoral potential of about 35 per cent; the Green Party tapped even less of its theoretical 25 per cent.

*Fifthly:* The election was decided not by the big issues but by the Chancellor's magnetism and the media's willing transfixation.

*Sixthly:* The already large disjoint between the necessity for social democratic answers to the problems of the age (*social democratic moment*) and the corresponding election results has widened.

*Structural* and *situative* factors underlie these trends. The former include, firstly, the persisting division of the political centre-left spectrum – formerly represented by the SPD alone – among three parties. The Green Party and the Left Party, initially underestimated as political fly-by-nights, have become permanent fixtures of our party-political system and will by all accounts remain so for the foreseeable. Secondly, in the expanded hunting grounds of the Berlin Republic the new media democracy has become more sensationalist, more irresponsible and, in terms of journalists' socio-economic interests, more »neo-bourgeois«, with a good portion of disdain (or even disgust) for »left-wing« politics and a lowering of inhibitions against direct intervention in the political arena.

The situative factors include the constellation of issues and the positioning of the parties. The latter is a product of political profiles, the ability of their leaderships to embody these, their communication during the campaign and their power perspective. In face of the European crisis, Angela Merkel perfectly embodies a greedy, nationalistic individualism of the Germans, yet cloaks it in »humane« guise as the über-mother. She also serves as a projection screen for a nostalgic aversion to politics in uncomfortable times. This effective embodiment of deep yearnings papered over her lack of programmatic substance. She did not even need to publicly brandish her strongest weapon, the »German Europe«, but it remained the secret subtext of these elections from start to finish.

The SPD, on the other hand, reinstated a more recognisable social democratic profile by synthesising an emphasis on social justice with the more presentable elements of the Agenda 2010. Its clever and competent leading candidate also campaigned unflinchingly for that programme, to the astonishment of many especially in the media. What remained absent was a convincing embodi-

ment of this political substance and a realistic perspective of power. The lack of the latter was always in the air, due to the ritual refusal of any form of cooperation with the Left Party – supplied even where not demanded by the media – and the waning strength of the Green Party.

The SPD leadership ruled out any of the three forms of cooperation with a realistic-leaning left party as tested in other European countries (informal toleration, formal cooperation, coalition). The legitimate argument here was that coalition questions must never be regarded simply statically because every interaction of the involved parties changes the political landscape and the behaviour of voters. Although the arguments for a flat rejection of any form of cooperation with the Left Party at the present juncture can be challenged on the grounds outlined above, they certainly cannot be rejected out of hand. The dynamic of a such risky coalition process could in Germany – unlike for example in the northern European democracies – certainly lead to so many defections from the centre ground that the majority no longer added up. But political bridges never can be built without risk. And it should be remembered that the argument cuts both ways: the Left Party would be changing too, perhaps more rapidly and deeply than imagined, under the constraints of a cooperation it has long yearned for. New figures have moved up to occupy the front benches, realistic policy positions have gained weight as dogmatic illusions retreat. This is just what occurred in the early history of the SPD, and more recently with the Green Party. The strategy followed in this election campaign, of honing the social democratic profile for a *coalition explicitly with the Green Party*, can only succeed if it can be liberated from the deadweight of ongoing rejection of any form of cooperation with the Left Party. It would be more effective, and absolutely adequate for the assertion of social democratic identity to name, as Peer Steinbrück did, the points of Left Party policy that are unacceptable for social democrats, in association with a clarification of the political principles without which political cooperation is impossible. The concrete question of whether and how cooperation could unfold with a Left Party that is indeed gradually becoming »more sensible« can then be left to the voters and the specific situation. Such a step could certainly be communicated in the media, would open up a plausible power perspective for social democracy and would take an important strategic lever out of the hands of the CDU. And it would from the very outset influence internal dynamics within the Left Party.

In the short term, the election result offers no way out that will not make the party's situation even more complicated. A grand coalition might lead to internal strife. Going into opposition against a coalition of Christian democrats and Greens led by a Chancellor in continuing symbiosis with most of the media would be a problematic choice. And the prospect of new elections bodes disaster for the SPD. After the leadership's repeated categorical refutations, none of the variants involving the Left Party is possible this time around. After a protracted and troublesome birth a rerun of the grand coalition will likely see the light of the world. This will be rather less painful, if the CDU signalises at an early stage that it would accept important demands from the social democratic election manifesto such as tax increases for higher incomes, a wealth tax, a statutory minimum wage, and investment in childcare infrastructure. This must be accompanied by a change of course on Europe, abandoning the rigid fixation on mere austerity in favour of programmes for economic growth and jobs for the Mediterranean countries.

Merkel could accomplish such a turnaround on the basis that it was the only way to ensure stability for Germany. In that case it would be very difficult for the SPD to refuse, as it would otherwise leave itself open to accusations of abrogating its national responsibilities. Of course even in the case of a coalition with significant social democratic input, two further factors would have to be brought into play, if the smaller SPD were not to be crushed by Merkel's big CDU. The first would be to insist on keeping the social democrats' own profile in the public eye as a recognisable contrast to the line of the CDU-led government. The second condition for success in a grand coalition is likely to lie in dropping the absolute exclusion of cooperation with the Left Party. The SPD would be ill-advised to accompany its participation in a grand coalition – regardless of its policy contribution – with a solemn oath to exclude any cooperation with the Left Party now or in future, regardless of how it and the country's situation develop.

There is no »left-wing camp« deserving of the name in Germany today, only a centre-left spectrum of three parties with rather different cultural, historic and policy backgrounds. If the lack of success of their separate endeavours passes a certain pain threshold, the wish could grow in each of them to concentrate on what unites them and set aside what divides them in order to



put into practice those points where their ideas of a better society overlap. That has succeeded in the relationship between Green Party and SPD, although admittedly without the sought-after electoral success. There are many who want the same inside the Left Party. It would be good if they would express that in credible way through a more realistic programme of action. Such a move would

redraw the political playing field of the Republic. The SPD must remain open for that.

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## The Party That Does Not Like Its Country?

Ernst Hillebrand

The election result of 22 September teaches us a number of lessons. Most of these have already been elaborated and discussed. Yes, there was an obvious mismatch between the aim of the campaign – to win back the voters lost in 2005 and 2009 because of the Agenda 2010 – and a candidate who embodied this agenda like almost no other. After all his initial personal blunders, Peer Steinbrück's campaign was never able to cast off the negative stereotypes associated with him: dead man walking, for ten long months. The fading of any real prospect of an SPD-Green majority during the campaign was just as detrimental as the Greens' attempt to poach SPD voters by playing a leftist electoral agenda. After 23 years, the isolation strategy towards the left party Die Linke has also run its course, as the SPD will, for the time being, not be able to form a majority coalition without them.

Yet none of this is sufficient to explain the SPD's defeat and, moreover, the dimensions of that defeat. The reasons for this lie on a different plane altogether. The main problem with the SPD's campaign of 2013 was that it failed completely to address the emotional state of the country. This state was not awfully hard to detect: Demoscopic evidence of all kinds indicated that the majority of Germans felt at peace with themselves and their country. And this state of affairs was not the result of a skilfully sluggish election campaign waged by the CDU. But rather the result of the economic and political situation of the country on which people based their evaluations. Market researchers at the Rheingold-Institut in Cologne described the mood in Germany shortly before the election as that of an »endangered paradise«, dominated by a longing »to make the present last forever«. »The desire to preserve the endangered paradise Germany currently unites the political camps«, was how the institute put it. Many of the data – from how people evaluated their personal economic situation to the general consumer and investment climate – showed a country that regarded itself as an island of stability in a crisis-shaken continent. In September, only 8% of the population saw their own personal economic future pessimistically.

It would be wholly untrue to say that a positive fundamental mood needed to be a problem for the Social

Democratic election campaign per se. On the contrary: precarious employment and low wages are a scandal precisely *because* the economy and businesses are doing so well. To quote the Rheingold market researchers again: »Across the entire party spectrum, 81 % of voters say that social justice should be the primary aim of the German government, [...] respondents on the left named solidarity, social commitment, justice and equal opportunities as core values of a country with a »clear conscience«. People in this camp, too, are proud that Germany has managed to weather the crisis and they would like stability to continue.« The main problem with the SPD campaign was that it completely ignored these sentiments. We never really tried to address peoples' pride in this country and in the things they had worked for and achieved.

Clearly, an opposition campaign is always subject to constraints of this kind: it must criticise rather than affirm. But that criticism could have been coined in different terms. The campaign's rhetoric and its symbolism could have been based on a narrative of »recognition« of this country's strong performance and its past consolidation efforts. Such a positive campaign would have been so incredibly simple to stage, because it was actually the SPD which had conceived and organised many of the reform processes that enabled Germany to come through the crisis. We could have told people: »You are good, but you are being governed in a way that does not do you justice. You produce all these marvellous things that the whole world wants to have. *You* are the world champions in exports. And you have a right to be world champions as well when it comes to education, quality of life and infrastructure.« But we failed to make use of any of this. Instead we conducted an election campaign largely devoid of empathy or positive symbolism.

Basically our campaign once again fell into the eternal trap of all campaigns of the Left. The significance of the emotional, »precognitive dimension« of political decisions was completely underestimated, or, worse still, completely misjudged. We cite Drew Westen, but we do not implement his insights. The CDU did not fall into this trap, but rather cleverly picked up on the mood of the

country. Playing a totally different game, its campaign was systematically attuned to emotional messages. This also applied to the negative framing of Peer Steinbrück's personality and the unscrupulous »paedophilia« campaign against the Greens: in neither case was it about the issue itself but rather about undermining the opposition's *moral* credibility. In contrast, the central axis of the conservative's campaign was to promote the feel-good factor and to communicate a »We are Germany« message, right down to the necklace featuring the national colours that Angela Merkel wore during the TV debate with Steinbrück. Given the general mood of »Germans at peace with themselves« and the widespread perception of the EU as a potential source of problems and dangers, this all made sense – and indeed it paid off.

So the really worrying prospect augured by the 22 September result is that of a situation like that in Bavaria – where the conservatives reign supreme since many years – being replicated at the national level. The CDU is in the process of claiming a monopoly on the positive sense of national identity that exists in Germany for some time now. The SPD, by contrast, risks to be seen as a party of naggers, a party that does not really like the country and its inhabitants, wants more Brussels than Berlin and that constantly sees only the half-empty glass. The CDU's model for its role as the »Germany party« is the Bavarian CSU. In power since 1957, the party has a broad base in all sectors of the population (including blue collar workers), takes all the credit for Bavaria's economic successes and monopolizes the feelings of local patriotism and identity. The SPD regularly scores around 20% in this richest and most modern part of Germany.

There are two stupid things that we could do right now. First of all, to convince ourselves that majority support for our policies really exists among the electorate and that we only failed to activate it. The election result tells a different story. The conservative camp (CDU, FDP, AfD) clearly polled more votes than the Left (SPD, Greens, Die Linke, Pirate Party). The second mistake would be for us to assume that the voters were simply too stupid to understand the beauty of our positions. Unfortunately, it was the other way round: we were too stupid to understand the mood of the electorate.

Instead, we need to think urgently about how we, as a party, can generate a positive position vis-à-vis the German realities. This is all the more important as many

elements indicate that the good economic shape in which the country currently finds itself will continue for some time to come. And it is important to realise where Germany currently stands in social and political terms. The deep conflicts which more or less constantly marked post-1945 Germany – the division of the country and the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, the aftermath of fascism and the deep moral and cultural conflict between the war generation and their sons and daughters, the student revolt of 1968 and the leftist terrorism of the 1970s, the conflicts of the 80s about nuclear energy, the deployment of euromissiles and the ecological sustainability of our industrial civilisation – have now gone off the screen. The major upheaval of the 1990s, German reunification, is, in psychological, economic and political terms, largely consumed. A perfect symbolic expression of this is the fact that Germany's two highest state offices are now held by »Ossis« – former East Germans – without anyone getting particularly excited about it. The reforms of the 2000s have been largely defused of their political explosiveness, because the labour market has improved and real wages have finally started to rise again since 2007 – after almost twenty years of stagnation. The discussion about immigration and its consequences has calmed down since the Sarrazin debate. At the same time, the profound crisis in many parts of the Eurozone make the country seem like a haven of economic and political-administrative stability in an increasingly unstable continent.

The German Left needs – however difficult it may find this – to develop a positive, forward-looking political message to match this mood. This in no way implies brushing aside the country's socio-economic aberrations; quite the contrary. But we must combine our criticism of these aberrations with a positive emotional message for the population, which fundamentally has no problem with this country and which believes –and this too is part of the picture – that »Europe« is actually more of a problem than a solution. At the level of the federal states and the local level the SPD has no trouble with this, always having »North-Rhine Westphalia at heart« as the regional elections campaign slogan went. We must urgently find an intelligent way of doing something similar at the national level. Otherwise, Bavaria will be everywhere...

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