

Sifting through the German Election Results: Which Loser Won?

By Jens F. Laurson

When Gerhard Schröder called for new elections after the Social Democrats were soundly defeated in their long-time stronghold North-Rhine Westphalia, it looked like certain political suicide. Even close observers of the situation could not have foreseen one of the closest political election results in the history of the FRG – much less predicted a solid majority on the left. Even if one might have assumed the result closer than the 20-plus point lead that the polls suggested at one point for the CDU/CSU, the near-stalemate that Germany is now faced with came as a surprise.

Schröder counted on two to three occurrences during the campaign that he knew could be relied upon – and he did so with such success he nearly achieved the inconceivable: a third term. He calculated on the German's unwillingness for necessary and perhaps temporarily painful change; Angela Merkel's ability to turn people towards Schröder; his own, indefatigable and brazen populism.

All that and the free-be of the finance minister-to-be, Paul Kirchhoff (playing into his hands by being on his own campaign trail instead of the CDU's) worked nicely. As a result the lead of Angela Merkel which had been thought comfortable enough to weather all storms melted down to an embarrassing 0.9 percent. Her performance must undoubtedly go into the German history books as one of the worst, most botched campaigns ever fought on a national level.

The concept she started out with was admittedly good: Tell the people the truth (for once); don't promise the sky; make the campaign about policy not people. Unfortunately the candidate itself and the execution of this concept were dreadful. While the CDU was busy trying to control the damage its own politicians caused, the party had no time (or ability) to expose Schröder's misinformation campaign for the blatant populism it was. Instead of denying him a platform, the CDU agreed to a debate. Unfortunately for Merkel, merely having done being better than expected was not enough. Her bland performance may not have immediately resulted in a big drop in the polls (less than three percent) – but it breathed life into the SPD again. In the end, the CDU got a smaller percentage of the vote than when Stoiber lost in the election three years ago. Since she was ultimately responsible for the campaign, Angela Merkel – as she will become Germany's first female chancellor within a fortnight, must be considered the primary loser of the 2005 campaign.

All this notwithstanding, Ms. Merkel - within hours of the election results having been public - claimed that the country had given her a mandate for change. That

isn't her delusion (she's too smart to actually believe that), it's just a pathetic, perhaps tactical, lie. If the convoluted election result sent any message whatsoever – it is the expression of unwillingness for change and reform. (The FDP's Otto Graf von Lambsdorf remarked along those lines dryly after he was asked what the Germans had voted for.)

But if Merkel is the primary loser it does not, by extension, make Schröder the winner. Although he outperformed even the wildest expectations, he has no majority and he will not be the chancellor. The Party-backing he received during the election came on account of his charisma, not his policies. His days in German politics are now over. With the unsavory campaign behind him, he may not have many friends in the CDU/CSU or FDP left. If calling Ms. Merkel a "heartless person" on account of her tax plans wasn't simply stupid enough to drive voters away (apparently not), it was at least offensive enough to make his future participation in national politics unlikely.

Other losers: The FDP had a great result (at the expense of the CDU, in part), but faced with the grand coalition, they shall remain the loyal opposition. The Greens saw their coalition voted out of power and the Ex-Communists-Anti-American-Anti-Capitalist party (I *think* that's the official name) overtook them in the poll. The latter may bask in 8% of the vote but not in governmental responsibility.

With a grand coalition being the political future for four years, Germans can only hope that it might perform better than generally expected. Neither Schröder with his horror-scenarios of a cold hearted Germany nor Merkel with her vision of (ultimately inevitable) reform inspired enough Germans to give them a mandate. If Germany is run down as a result of gridlock and inaction, at least the voters cannot blame anyone but themselves. Inaction is what they voted for.

