

ELECTION BRIEFING No.23 THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG ELECTION OF SEPTEMBER 2005

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Key Points:

- The 2005 election was called a year early by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder following a string of regional election defeats, widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the red-green government that he led and increasing institutional deadlock between the Social Democrat/Green majority in the Bundestag and the Christian Democrat/Christian Social (CDU/CSU) controlled Bundesrat.
- Despite unfavourable circumstances, the Social Democratic Party closed a seemingly impregnable opinion poll gap over the late summer months to make this one of the most exciting – and in many ways baffling – elections in living memory.
- The Christian Democrat parties became the largest grouping in parliament, but its lead over the Social Democrats was a slender one per cent. Despite their low share of the vote, the two largest parties eventually – after two months of wrangling – entered national government together for the first time since 1969. Angela Merkel therefore became not only Germany's first ever female Chancellor, but also the first to herald from eastern Germany.
- The Social Democratic Party's previous governing partner, the Green Party, polled fractionally fewer votes than 2002 and subsequently went into opposition.
- The free market Free Democratic Party substantially increased its vote share and was one of the two clear 'winners' in the election
- The other 'winner' was the rejuvenated Party of the Left – a re-named PDS bolstered by disillusioned former Social Democrat members from western Germany – which entered parliament having polled 8.7 per cent of the vote
- Although forming a government was not easy, the doomsayers may – for once – be proved wrong. Angela Merkel's astute leadership may help the so-called 'Grand Coalition' to be one of Germany's more successful governments of recent times.

Introduction

The Bundestag election of 18th September 2002 was remarkable for a number of reasons. In Angela Merkel Germany now has a female Chancellor for the first time in its history. Merkel is also the first eastern German to be elected to the post. Her path to the Chancellery was not, however, nearly as straightforward as many expected it to be in the summer of 2005. Gerhard Schröder – the incumbent Chancellor and embattled leader of the Social Democratic Party – almost managed to pull off a comeback of Houdini-like proportions despite his social democrats trailing in the polls by a massive 18 per cent in mid-July. A lacklustre Christian Democratic campaign that was littered with errors and gaffes assisted not just the social democrats, but also the free market Free Democratic Party and the socialist Party of the Left, both of which registered vote shares with which they will be highly satisfied.

Before analysing the outcome, it is worth remembering that no one expected 2005 to be an election year at all. German parliaments sit for four year fixed terms and, following an election in September 2002, the next federal poll was not scheduled to take place until late 2006. The German President is only authorised to dissolve parliament in extreme circumstances – namely if the Chancellor has lost the support of his/her parliamentary majority – and, as 2005 dawned, few would have predicted that any such circumstances were likely to develop. The red-green majority remained small (just 4), but manageable. Although the Social Democrat/Green government was unpopular, there was little evidence of a groundswell of public opinion in support of the Christian Democrats and/or the Free Democrats. Popular demonstrations against the Social Democrat/Green programme of labour market and welfare reforms (the so-called ‘Agenda 2010’) that had been visible through the Summer of 2004 had largely faded away, and although a new force to the left of the Social Democrats – ‘The Electoral Alternative: The Party for Employment and Social Justice’ (WASG) – was beginning to take shape, there was still little sign that it would seriously destabilise the party system in the short term. A significant number of left-wing Social Democratic members were calling for parts of the Agenda 2010 programme – noticeably those involving unemployment benefit and social support – to be altered, but this seemed to be the normal fare of everyday party politics. There was, therefore, little hint of the drama to come.

The main catalyst for the snap election was the result of the regional election in Northrhine-Westphalia in May 2005. Germany’s most populous *Land* has long been a bastion of Social Democratic support. Social Democrat-led governments had governed continuously in Düsseldorf since December 1966 and a Christian Democratic Union victory in the Social Democrat’s heartland would clearly place Schröder under considerable internal pressure to moderate his reforming agenda. Party activists members were likely to feel that a swing to the left was the only way to avoid a leakage of members to the WASG and, possibly, a major split within the party. The result was none the less not actually as bad as some doomsayers within the Social Democrats had feared, but in the final analysis there could be no doubt as to who were the winners and who were the losers. The Christian Democrats polled 44.8 per cent of the vote (up 7.8 per cent on their showing in the previous election in Northrhine-Westphalia in 2000), while the Social Democrats came a poor second on 37.1 per cent (down 5.7 per cent). It was also clear that Social Democratic voters had not simply opted to vote Green as a form of mini-protest – the Green Party *also* lost

votes, polling 6.2 per cent (down 0.9 per cent). Social Democratic voters must, at least to some extent, have left the centre-left camp and supported the Christian Democratic Union. This, above all else, worried the party leadership. If something similar happened at the national level then the Christian and Free Democrats would win the next election at a canter.

Given such a bleak scenario, why did Schröder none the less opt for the nuclear option of calling an early election, very possibly in the knowledge that it could see his government evicted from office? Speculation abounds, and we will probably have to wait for Schröder's memoirs to be published before we will really know, but there are a number of factors that will certainly have influenced his decision. Schröder is – and he proved this again in the summer of 2005 – a fearsome campaigner. His charm, charisma, quick-wittedness and statesmanlike demeanour are considerable electoral assets and he may well have believed that the excitement of an upcoming election campaign would make his party (and the public at large) forget his contribution to the Social Democratic Party's disastrous performance in Northrhine-Westphalia. Schröder may also have calculated that he would be catching the Christian Democrats well and truly unprepared – in programmatic, organisational and strategic terms. The Christian Democratic Union's own agenda was still a point of considerable contention within party ranks and although Angela Merkel was favourite to run for the chancellorship, her election to the status of 'Spitzenkandidat' was by no means set in stone. The opinion polls were also telling a number of stories of which Schröder will have been aware; one of these was that while 66 per cent of voters in May 2005 proclaimed themselves dissatisfied with the work of the Social Democratic/Green government, 50 per cent of them expected a Christian Democratic regime to do no better. Furthermore, 11 per cent actually thought that a black-yellow coalition would actually do a worse job, while only 36 per cent expected a new government to be an improvement on the present one (Politbarometer, May 2005). In the summer of 2005 Germans were anything other than a politically contented people.

Germany's Byzantine legislative processes may also have forced Schröder's hand. The prospect of governing with a Christian Democratic Union dominated upper chamber became ever less – as an election loomed large on the horizon – palatable. It is worth remembering that the red-green government lost its majority in the upper house, the Bundesrat, two years previously, in February 2003, when a Christian Democratic Union-led government took over the reins of power in Schröder's home state of Lower Saxony. The Social Democratic/Green government's narrow majority in the first chamber, the Bundestag, would therefore not suffice to pass any major piece of legislation. The Christian Democrats, on the other hand, were faced with a choice: should they block anything and everything that the federal government attempted to do or look to actively shape federal legislation in order to pull Germany out of its socio-economic malaise? Strategic support would leave the country in a much better state should the Christian Democrats win the planned election in 2006 – but any economic upturn might just present Schröder with enough ammunition with which to return to office himself. The Christian Democrat's position was therefore not an easy one, particularly as 'Agenda 2010' was in many ways not a radical reform agenda, but a set of policies that the government believed the Christian Democrats should, could and would support.

Between February 2003 and May 2005 Schröder therefore displayed no little political skill in dealing with the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats. His government carefully crafted relatively radical (in German terms) reform proposals that the Christian Democrats found difficult to genuinely oppose, while also dragging – for the most part – the left of his Social Democratic Party along too. Within this context, the formation of the breakaway WASG appeared to be a threat, but not an especially dangerous one as – at the time – polling five per cent of the votes in a national election appeared well beyond them. After the Northrhine-Westphalia defeat Schröder may well have decided that the balancing act was no longer viable. The Christian Democrat majority in the Bundesrat was even stronger and, most importantly, it is likely that they would have been much less consensual and much more confrontational in the months ahead. An election may well have been a year away, but the temptation for the opposition to continually defeat and even humiliate the Schröder administration was bound to become an ever more attractive proposition. Such behaviour was not likely to be taken lying down by Social Democrat members. Some recalcitrant left-wing trade unionists had already left the party for the WASG while some centrists were acutely aware that ‘Agenda 2010’ was still very unpopular in the population at large. So, facing a pre-election year of humiliating legislative defeats and a party that was internally becoming ever more uneasy, Schröder may well have decided that it was simply easier to boldly call the Christian Democrat’s bluff and have the fight there and then.

The Campaign

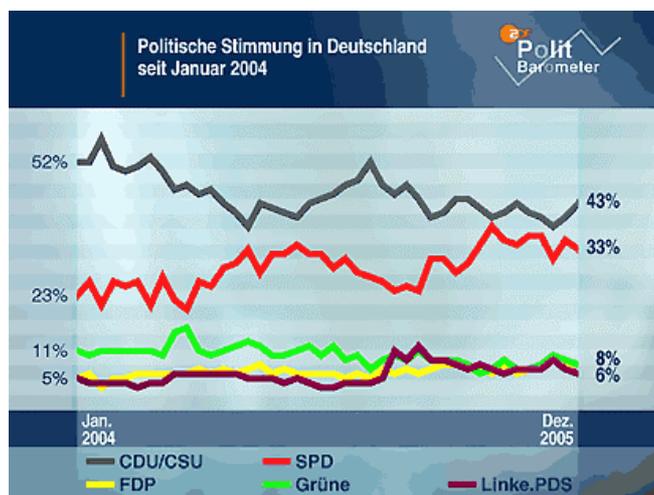
When Schröder announced his wish to call new elections, all eyes instinctively turned to the Federal President, Horst Köhler. His position was not an altogether easy one. Although there was indeed a precedent for permitting such an early election to take place (Helmut Kohl successfully brought forward elections in 1983), Gerhard Schröder clearly had not lost his parliamentary majority. Schröder was – according to his critics – frustrated by an impasse in parliament over much-needed reforms, was abusing his power dangerously and, in doing so, threatening Germany’s political stability. It was not that he did not have a reliable government, they argued, he just could not push through a package of reforms that was unpopular both within and without his government. Given that the constitution explicitly stipulates that a President should dissolve parliament only if a Chancellor loses his majority in the Bundestag, a number of politicians and commentators argued that Köhler should subsequently reject Schröder’s request. Schröder – well aware of the constitutional requirements – attempted to make Köhler’s job easier by contriving to lose a vote of confidence on 1st July, with most of his ministers abstaining in the crucial ballot. Schröder also told the President in private that he was worried that a significant number of left-wing social democrats were plotting to make the government’s life a misery in the coming months by refusing to support it in some of its more controversial bills. Quite how true such this claim was, we will never know, but it none the less remains clear that Schröder was indeed worried that Köhler would reject his ‘defeat’ in the July vote as nothing more than the elaborate fake that it was.

Even after Köhler finally agreed to dissolve parliament on 22nd July – on the grounds that the country was ‘in a serious economic situation’ and needed to elect a government ‘with a stable majority to address these problems’ – the protests over Schröder’s decision did not dissipate immediately. Although all of the main parties

began to prepare for 18th September in earnest, a number of smaller parties – most notably the Republicans, the Animal Protection Party and the Ecological-Democratic Party – complained that they simply did not have enough time to do this and that the election should be delayed. They took their case to the constitutional court to try and postpone the electoral contest. Two MPs – the social democrat Jelena Hoffmann and the Green Werner Schulz – were so furious at the ‘mishandling of parliament’ and the ‘farfical’ vote of confidence defeat that they also launched judicial proceedings to try and prevent the election from taking place. All of these criticisms had to be dealt with quickly by the federal constitutional court and the official green light for the election to go ahead was only given as late as the 18th August.

Even though constitutional questions remained unsolved, the main parties none the less started campaigning in earnest through July and August. The Social Democrats had ground to make up. As figure one illustrates, the Social Democratic Party was almost 30 percentage points behind the Christian Democrats in January 2004 and although the gap between the two parties closed a little towards the end of the year, by the beginning of 2005 the gap was once again widening. The Christian Democrat parties’ popularity peaked in February 2005 (when the CDU won a regional election in the northern German *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein), before slowly slipping back to around 41-42 per cent by May 2005. Worries (and a not inconsiderable amount of confusion) about the feasibility of the Christian Democrat parties’ programmatic agenda did not initially prompt voters to start drifting back to the Social Democratic Party and by the time of the defeat in Northrhein-Westphalia the Social Democrats remained well and truly stuck in the 20 per cent ghetto as the Party of the Left started to mobilise on its left flank.

Figure One
Voting Intentions in Germany, January 2004 – December 2005



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen:
<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFde/inhalt/3/0,1872,1020771,00.html> (viewed 6th January 2006)

Following Schröder’s decision to go to the polls, the Social Democratic Party’s fortunes none the less picked up. The threat of a Christian Democratic led government undoubtedly channelled the minds of a few disgruntled social democratic

waverers, while the Christian Democrats began to experience genuine difficulties of their own. Their agenda for government remained controversial even within their own ranks, and cantankerous (and very public) disagreements on how the health care and tax systems should be funded helped to foster an image of disunity. The comments of some of Angela Merkel's lieutenants – most notably the Christian Democratic Union's leader in Brandenburg, Jörg Schönbohm, and Bavarian PM Edmund Stoiber – also did little to foster internal harmony, particularly with eastern German party members and potential voters. Schönbohm's observation that eastern Germans had been 'proletarianised' by the pre-1989 SED regime and were therefore, firstly, more likely to behave in a wayward fashion and, secondly, possessed a greater acceptance of violence, did little to convince easterners to vote for the Christian Democratic Union, while Stoiber's repeated blunders also did little to improve the Christian Democratic image in the eastern states. On the 5th August he claimed that "it simply wasn't acceptable that eastern Germans decide who is to become the next Chancellor. These frustrated people should not be allowed to shape Germany's future" and, five days later, Stoiber – obviously not content with one broadside against the East – further added that "in this part of the world ... (Bavaria), the PDS and the WASG, or whatever it is that they are now called, has no chance at all. Unfortunately not everywhere has such intelligent people living there as we do in Bavaria – in fact, if only everywhere else were like Bavaria, then we wouldn't have any problems at all". All great stuff if your audience is situated in a Bavarian beer tent, but not so good if you are also trying to win votes in Germany's fifteen other states.

Rhetorical 'slips' such as those by Schönbohm and Stoiber were soon pushed into the background as the major issue of the campaign became another member of Angela Merkel's 'competence team' – the former constitutional court judge, Paul Kirchhoff. Initial reactions to Merkel's coup of persuading the highly regarded Kirchhoff to give up his party political neutrality and take up the position of financial expert in Merkel's election team were positive. No institution in Germany enjoys as much respect as the Federal Constitutional Court, and Kirchhoff had served it well for twelve years between 1987 and 1999. He was also well known to be a tax expert and Merkel clearly hoped that he would give the Christian Democrats' election team both added legitimacy and a genuine sense of gravitas. What Merkel neglected to consider was that Kirchhoff was not a politician and when put under pressure he quickly went off message. The tough compromise on tax policy that different factions within the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union had painfully agreed upon over the summer was soon blown out of the water as Kirchhoff discussed the need to bring in a single flat tax in order to facilitate economic development and, in particular, to compete with low tax regime countries in eastern and central Europe. Hasty attempts to stress that Kirchhoff was merely articulating his own opinions and not necessarily those of the Christian Democrats sounded woefully unconvincing as a belligerent Social Democratic Party pounced on the 'neo-liberal' Christian Democrats, sensing that it might have found the issue that could help return it to power.

Gerhard Schröder looked to make the most of Kirchhoff's erratic comments during the one and only televised debate that he had with Angela Merkel (Merkel claimed that it was simply impossible to fit another TV debate – there were two between Schröder and Stoiber in 2002 – into her busy schedule, although the truth is probably

that she realised that the telegenic and quick-witted incumbent was likely to benefit much more from the opportunity to go head-to-head with her). In the event, most commentators agreed that Schröder had the better of the exchanges in the 90 minute duel, but Merkel held her own and came across as both intellectually agile and politically resilient. The surprisingly heavy nature of the discussions – both Merkel and Schröder illustrated that they were well-versed in the intricacies of the tax, pensions, and health insurance systems – did not stop Schröder from expanding the profile of the Social Democrats leftwards in an attempt to win back floating voters who were considering voting for the Party of the Left (the re-named PDS plus WASG supporters). Schröder also claimed that only the Social Democrats could be trusted to defend the status quo while portraying Merkel as a dangerous neo-liberal reformer. In an interesting role reversal it appeared at times that Merkel was in fact the incumbent, defending her socio-economic policies, while Schröder attempted to pick holes in them. This tactic permanently re-occurred throughout the campaign. The Social Democrats relentlessly analysed the Christian Democrat parties' socio-economic agenda, placing Merkel and the Christian Democrats very much on the defensive. Schröder's claim that the Christian Democrats were a 'neo-liberal' party that was preparing to curtail Germany's extensive welfare state was never successfully countered. Christian Democrat slogans such as 'Sozial ist, was Arbeit schafft' ("socially acceptable policies are ones that create jobs") never had the effect that the Christian Democrats wanted, particularly as public debate centred around Kirchhoff's flat tax strategies. If voters appeared to remember anything else about the Christian Democratic campaign, then it was the party's wish to increase VAT by two per cent – hardly conclusive evidence, giving the regressive nature of VAT, of offering support to the less well-off within society.

Yet despite the various gaffes that plagued a surprisingly lacklustre Christian Democratic campaign, the opinion polls still looked ominous for the Social Democratic Party as it remained stuck around the 33-35 per cent mark. Even though the electorate remained unconvinced of the Christian Democrats' ability to govern effectively, the Christian Democrats none the less continued to hover around 5-7 percentage points ahead of the Social Democrats. The Party of the Left – inspired by the decision of former Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine to run alongside Gregor Gysi as '*Spitzenkandidat*' – looked certain to re-enter the federal parliament, remaining stable at around 9-10 per cent. Although the Greens were also less popular than they had been three years previously, they also appeared certain to clear the five per cent barrier easily. The Greens were unequivocal about what role they would take after the election – should they be unable to continue in government with the Social Democrats, then they would seek to act as a constructive opposition. The Free Democratic Party was also confident of its role in the new Bundestag – it envisaged being the junior partner in a Christian Democratic-led coalition and all opinion polls in the run up to 18th September pointed in this direction. It therefore seemed straightforward; Germans were not enthusiastic about a prospective Christian Democrat led government, but enough of them were so disillusioned with the Social Democrat/Green administration that a change of government in some form appeared very likely.

One issue that played virtually no role in the election campaign was that of Europe (in all its facets). This is not, on the one hand, altogether surprising. The severity of the policy challenges at home ensured that issues of socio-economic reform were at the

forefront of voter's minds. The Christian Democrats subsequently sought to challenge the government's economic record while the Social Democrats attempted to pick holes in the opposition's proposed reform agenda. Such a concentration on internal issues may perhaps be a little unusual (Gerhard Schröder's posturing over the Iraq War certainly helped him win the 2002 election and Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik was a constant theme of campaigns in the 1970s), but only rarely in the post-war history of Germany has any party diverged from a broad pro-European consensus. 2005 proved no different.

However, before the campaign began there was one clear European issue on which the two main parties *did* differ; that of Turkish membership of the EU. While the social democrats have always been supportive of Turkey's application, the Christian Democrats – and particularly the Christian Social Union in Bavaria – have been (and still are) highly sceptical of it. They remain wary of Turkey's economic frailty, its weakly embedded democratic structures and also of its different cultural heritage. Yet, none of these issues surfaced in the campaign. Christian Democratic politicians were no doubt aware that many Germans shared their scepticism, but they none the less avoided seriously introducing the 'Türkeifrage' into the campaign. This may well have been because of the incendiary nature of the issue, but also as the social democrats rarely gave the Christian Democrats the opportunity to genuinely go on the offensive. Come what may, Europe remained in many ways the great non-issue of this campaign – as has been the case in most German elections since 1945.

The Results

As 18th September dawned, few seriously doubted that Angela Merkel would be declaring herself Chancellor by the end of the day. Yet, come the early evening talk shows it was Gerhard Schröder who was belligerently claiming that the election result gave him, and him alone, the authority to lead any future government. Schröder's aggressive performance in the traditional round table of party leaders on the evening of the election shocked many Germans, as he bellowed that Merkel "couldn't seriously claim to be Chancellor" after the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats failed to achieve their expected parliamentary majority. He appeared astoundingly confrontational, uninterested in any form of compromise and confident to the point of reckless. The Social Democratic Party may well have achieved one of the poorest election results in its history, but given its forlorn prospects just months, weeks, days and even hours earlier, Schröder was quick to illustrate how close they had come to polling the most votes and how poorly – when compared with its opinion poll showings – the Christian Democrats had performed.

Table 1
The Result of the 2005 Federal Election in Comparative Perspective (second votes)

	2005		2002		1998	
Electorate	61,870,711		61,432,868		60,762,751	
Votes Cast	48,044,134		48,582,761		49,947,087	
Turnout (%)	77.7		79.1		82.2	
Valid Votes	47,287,988		47,996,480		49,308,512	
SPD	16,194,665	34.2	18,488,668	38.5	20,181,269	40.9
CDU	13,136,740	27.8	14,167,561	29.5	14,004,908	28.4
FDP	4,648,144	9.8	3,538,815	7.4	3,080,955	6.2
Left Party	4,118,194	8.7	1,916,702	4.0	2,515,454	5.1
Greens	3,838,326	8.1	4,110,355	8.6	3,301,624	6.7
CSU	3,494,309	7.4	4,315,080	9.0	3,324,480	6.7
NPD	748,568	1.6	215,232	0.4	126,571	0.3
Others	1,109,042	2.4	1,244,067	2.6	2,773,251	5.7

SOURCE: <http://www.election.de>

The exact results can be seen in table 1. The Social Democrats polled 2.3 million votes less than they did in 2002 (down 4.3 per cent), but the Christian Democrats also lost 1.8 million voters (down 3.3 per cent). This left the Christian Democrats with 35.2 per cent of the popular vote – their second worst result since 1949 – and the Social Democrats with 34.2 per cent. Little more than half (53 per cent) of all those eligible to vote gave their support to one of the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union or Social Democrats – the worst performance by the *Volksparteien* since 1949. The Christian Democrats performed particularly poorly in southern Germany, where the Christian Social Union – no doubt on account of the fact that a Bavarian, Edmund Stoiber, ran as the Christian Democratic chancellor candidate in 2002 and artificially inflated the Christian Democrat parties' vote – lost over 800,000 votes in Bavaria alone. The Christian Democrats also – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the particularly clumsy campaign that it ran there – performed badly in eastern Germany where they mobilised barely a quarter of the votes (25.3 per cent compared with 37.4 per cent in western Germany). Even in veritable eastern strongholds such as Saxony, where the Christian Democratic Union has regularly polled above 50 per cent of the vote in regional elections, the Christian Democratic Union could only manage 30.2 per cent.

The Social Democratic Party's result may have been better than many social democrats had feared, but it was still 4.3 per cent down on 2002. The Social Democrats had lost over 2.3 million voters and Social Democratic politicians were much more upbeat about the Christian Democratic Union's failings than they were their own party's performance. Like the Christian Democratic Union, the Social Democrats performed better in western Germany (35.1 per cent) than they did in the eastern states (30.4 per cent). Their vote none the less remained a lot more consistent across the 16 *Länder* than was the Christian Democrats, performing best in Gerhard

Schröder's home state of Lower Saxony (43.2 per cent) and worst in Saxony (24.5 per cent). Even then, the Saxon Social Democrats had experienced meltdown in the 2004 regional election, not even managing 10 per cent of the popular vote, so polling 24.5 per cent was by no means an unmitigated disaster.

The real surprise package of the election was the Free Democratic Party. Few within the party can have seriously believed that they would poll 9.8 per cent of the vote, representing over 1.1 million votes more than the party achieved in 2002. The Free Democrats had attempted to present themselves as a much more serious actor than had been the case in the previous election when they came to be known as the 'Fun Party' and their quietly efficient reform-orientated campaign – concentrating on the need to lower non-wage labour costs and taxes as well as using market forces to generate economic growth – clearly did the party no harm at all. It is none the less clear that the Free Democrats benefited strongly from the Christian Democrat parties' weakness and many voters switched – at an exceptionally late stage in the day – from the Christian Democrats to the Free Democrats.

What was most irritating for the Christian Democrats was that the late vote-switchers to the Free Democrats came from with the centre-right camp. Much of the talk in the week before the election was of the possibility of a Grand Coalition between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats should the Free Democrats not poll enough votes to secure a centre-right coalition with the Christian Democrats. Although opinion polls consistently gave the centre-right a majority, the lead was never large enough to be comfortable and the danger either of statistical error blurring true feelings or late swings changing the electoral balance could not be discounted. A significant number of centre-right supporters therefore opted – very late in the day – to support the Free Democrats in an attempt to sure up their preferred coalition partner. The fact that 41 per cent of all Free Democrat supporters stated in exit polls that they "actually preferred the CDU/CSU" is clear evidence of this, as is the fact that the Free Democrats polled 9.5 per cent in a state where it traditionally does poorly and where the Christian Democrats normally do very well; Bavaria.

The Party of the Left was the other clear winner of the 2005 election, polling 8.7 per cent of the vote and re-entering the Berlin parliament that it left in 2002. Although, in legal terms, the Party of the Left is the old eastern German PDS under another name, its willingness to put candidates from WASG on its open lists undoubtedly opened it up to new electoral groups in western Germany. The Party of the Left maintained its stronghold in the East, polling 25.3 per cent, while registering 4.9 per cent in the West. The party's excellent performance in the West – where it previously struggled to poll even 1 per cent of the vote – had much to do with Oskar Latontaine's talismanic presence. His anti-capitalist rhetoric appealed to disgruntled socialists and social democrats across the western states. Roughly a quarter of all voters who supported the Party of the Left in 2005 voted SPD in 2002, while around 10 per cent did not vote at all. The Party of the Left therefore successfully managed to build on its previous strengths; it maintained a clear presence amongst those possessing university degrees, civil servants, the unemployed and those with strong connections to the GDR. In 2005 it also managed to appeal more to workers with a strong belief that more social justice was needed in German society as well as those with much lower levels of education. Whether the Party of the Left can build on this result in future elections remains, however, very much to be seen.

There is precious little evidence to suggest that the structural majority of the left – albeit a diverse and, at present, incoherent one – has been broken. Germany remains a social democratic country at heart and if the Christian Democrats want to return to power in 2009 then they will have to win over voters from the centre/centre-left rather than from those in their own centre-right camp. The successes of the Free Democrats and the Party of the Left may be signs of increasing party system differentiation, but one should be careful in overplaying such sentiments. Many Free Democratic supporters in 2005 are Christian Democrats at heart and the Party of the Left benefited hugely from public dissatisfaction with the social democrats and also from the presence of the notorious loose canon Oskar Lafontaine. Processes of party system consolidation, as Free Democrat voters think about returning home and Party of the Left voters are wooed back by a more overtly leftist Social Democratic Party, therefore cannot be ruled out.

Of Traffic Lights and Jamaicans: The Election Aftermath

Although very few Germans actually sought a post-election Grand Coalition, the results left – in the cold light of day – very little option but to head down this unconventional route. Only once in post-war German history have the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats governed together (1966-69), and Hans-Georg Kiesinger's government is widely perceived (if perhaps a little unfairly so) as being one of Germany's most inauspicious governments.

In the immediate period following the election, politicians from all sides did not shirk from attempting to bring rather more imaginative coalition possibilities to the negotiating table. The Social Democratic Party – keen on remaining the largest party in government – periodically reminded the public that it was indeed the single largest party in parliament (a slightly cheap claim given that the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union, although separate parties, do always form a joint parliamentary group) and that thoughts of a 'traffic light' coalition (based on the colours that the respective parties are associated with) with the Greens and Free Democrats should not be dismissed out of hand. This is something that the Greens none the less did, and their leader, Reinhard Bütikofer, was unequivocal in stating that as red-green had indeed lost its majority, the Green party would be conducting its affairs as a party of opposition. The Free Democratic Party was also patently uninterested in any such traffic-light alliance, and much preferred to speculate on the chances of what came to be known as the 'Jamaica Option' (as the respective colours of the parties involved are the same as those used in the national flag of the Caribbean island); a Christian Democratic led government, supported by both the Free Democrats and Greens. The Greens were not, despite the best efforts of some Free Democrats and Christian Democrats, remotely interested. Hence a Grand Coalition it clearly had to be.

The next question then involved personalities; who would lead it and who would be in the cabinet? Almost immediately Gerhard Schröder claimed that there was only one person who could be Chancellor; him. His macho posturing initially left Angela Merkel a little shell-shocked, but over the course of the next few days and weeks she recovered and it became clear that Merkel would – as convention dictated, given her

position as leader of the largest parliamentary grouping – take up the reins of power. Schröder's aggressive tactics none the less enabled the Social Democrats to negotiate a surprisingly powerful range of portfolios within the cabinet in exchange for Schröder eventually leaving the political stage. 8 of the 15 Cabinet members come from the Social Democratic Party, while only 7 (plus Merkel) come from the Christian Democrats despite it polling more votes on election day. Furthermore, the Social Democrats managed to wrestle a number of important portfolios away from the Christian Democrats; in particular, Frank-Walter Steinmeier was a surprise choice as Foreign Minister, while former Northrhine-Westphalian Prime Minister Peer Steinbrück took over from his colleague Hans Eichel in the Finance Ministry.

The Christian Democrat bargaining position was not helped by (more) unhelpful distractions from Bavaria. Edmund Stoiber, Economics Minister designate, quickly articulated his dissatisfaction with the shape of his proposed portfolio. He publicly argued that various competencies that were then in the education and research ministries should be transferred to him. Untimely disputes with the future Education Secretary, Annette Schavan, also did little to enhance the Christian Democrat parties' attempt to find a common negotiating position with which to then approach the Social Democrats. Just as a solution to these spats was in sight, Stoiber promptly caused even more turmoil by opting to turn his back on the federal government altogether to return to his Bavarian fiefdom. Widely criticised both in the press and within his own party, Stoiber has left the national stage for the final time and it is likely that the Christian Social Union will seek to replace him as their leader in the not too distant future.

Given that it took almost two months to compile, the prospects for Angela Merkel's Grand Coalition were initially bleak. There was talk of elections within two years and of various Christian Democratic Union grandees fighting in the background to replace an (apparently) weak and uninspiring Chancellor. It is certainly too early to dismiss these claims completely and in the likes of Hesse's Prime Minister Roland Koch and Lower Saxony's State Premier Christian Wulff there are enthusiastic lieutenants who cannot be trusted to remain loyal in all circumstances. But, Merkel has been systematically underestimated throughout her career. She is not a talented speaker and is unlikely to inspire support on account of any rhetorical brilliance. She is, none the less, a calm and composed manager and these skills will clearly be of great use in steering her government through the choppy waters ahead. One does not, after all, accidentally end up leader of the Christian Democratic Union if one is a protestant female from eastern Germany – Merkel clearly has more political savvy than many give her credit for. Merkel's successful defence of German (and arguably European) interests in complex debates about the future financing of the European Union in December 2005 was just one example of her being much more of a 'doer' than a 'talker'. Add to this the likelihood that the German economy will, partly (although not exclusively) on account of reforms implemented by the previous administration, pick up in 2006 and 2007 – almost regardless of how Merkel's government behaves – and the prospects of the Grand Coalition need not be as dark as many initially claimed.

The German election of 2005 was – like its predecessor in 2002 – a very close run affair. Neither of the main parties convinced the electorate of the coherence of their agenda. The parties alone are arguably not to blame for this. Many Germans

appeared to want to preserve the social safety net that had served them so well in previous years while concurrently seeking a thorough overhaul of many facets of the social market economy. There was a widespread acceptance that ‘things have to change’ but an unwillingness amongst citizens to sacrifice too much on an individual level. As ever, it is frequently ‘the others’ who should be tightening the belt a little more. Given the schizophrenic signals that emanated from the German electorate in recent years, it should not come as too much surprise that neither of the two blocs was able to craft a programme that could garner a majority of the votes. Germany remains a consensus society and the Grand Coalition under Angela Merkel is probably the government that best reflects this – even if many Germans are perhaps unwilling to accept such a conclusion.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>