

## **2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 3 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN GERMANY JUNE 13 2004**

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### **Key points:**

- The election held to elect 99 German representatives to the European Parliament was always likely to be hijacked by affairs specific to the national arena. European themes played, at best, an occasional role in the campaign – at worst they were completely insignificant. The tortuous reform process undertaken by the governing social democrats was the main – often the only – talking point in the days and weeks running up to election day.
- Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Social Democratic Party (SPD) suffered a crushing – although not unexpected – defeat at the polls, trailing in 23% behind the opposition Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). The SPD's 21.5% represents its worst ever performance in an election held across the entire territory of the Federal Republic of Germany.
- Although the centre-right CDU/CSU polled 4.2% fewer votes than it did in 1999, the election was still a triumph for the Christian Democrats. With 44.5% of the popular vote the CDU/CSU remains the strongest German force within the EP.
- The Greens – the SPD's junior coalition partner – escaped largely unscathed, improving on their 1999 showing by 5.5%.
- The other two electorally significant smaller parties – the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the left-wing Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) – will look upon the election as a success. Both jumped the 5% barrier and they will both send seven representatives to the European Parliament in Strasbourg/Brussels.
- Turnout in Germany – as has been the case in every European election since 1989 – once again fell. Only 43% of those registered went to the polls, a worryingly low figure in a country where turnout is usually (reasonably) high. This is likely to be more an expression of disinterest in the affairs of the European Parliament than it is of dissatisfaction with the political system as a whole.
- The results are best understood as: (1) the punishment of an unpopular governing party (although, interestingly, not its junior partner); (2) an expression of apathy towards the affairs of the European Parliament and (3) a general indication of support – if not necessarily enthusiasm – for the opposition CDU/CSU.

As in previous elections to the European Parliament (EP), overtly European issues and influences were never likely to play a significant role in influencing German voters when they went to the polls on June 13 2004. Attitudes to expressly national problems, personalities and policies shaped the vote in more profound ways than attitudes to EU-specific themes. This was particularly so given: (1) the gruesomely low popularity ratings of the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD)/Green coalition; (2) the depressing economic picture evident across most industrial and service sectors and (3) the stubbornly high levels of unemployment that Gerhard Schröder's administration seemed unable to bring down.

Difficult political and economic circumstances aside, the history of voting behaviour in elections to the EP will also not have filled the SPD in particular with optimism. The main governing party in the majority of EU member states has traditionally been punished in what are, in effect, mid-term elections. There are of course a number of corollaries to this: the main opposition party tends to perform above expectations; the smaller parties tend to do much better than they would in national elections (on account of voters not worrying about 'wasting' their vote in 'less important' polls) and turnout is traditionally much lower than in traditional 'first order' elections<sup>1</sup> Those voters who do go to the polls have traditionally been seen as loyal party supporters or voters with a point to prove: and this point is frequently that they are not happy with the behaviour/outputs of the incumbent party in power.

German voters are no different to other voters in this regard: since the introduction of direct elections to the EP in 1979, German voters have systematically utilised them as vehicles with which to articulate their dissatisfaction with the behaviour and/or performance of the national government – no matter what the prevailing economic situation. In Germany this has tended to come in the form of supporting smaller, niche parties: in 1989 the right-wing Republicans registered 7.1% of the popular vote, while in 1994 the left-wing Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) managed 4.7% and 'others' 6.3%. In 1999 the PDS polled its highest (at that point) ever share of the vote in a national poll (5.8%) and 'others' once again remained 'on the map', with a noteworthy 3.7%. All of these smaller parties/groupings did noticeably worse in national elections both before and after these successes.

The SPD's exceptionally poor performance in 2004 cannot, however, be written off as a severe bout of the mid-term blues. There was more to it than that. The SPD/Green coalition was somewhat surprisingly re-elected by a wafer thin majority in September 2002 – and both coalition partners were well aware that they needed to improve on their first term performance. They therefore planned to launch programmes of socio-economic and welfare reforms in the hope of making good their own dallying in the 1998-2002 legislative period.<sup>2</sup> In its first term the SPD/Green government had actually ducked calls for radical reforms and by 2001/02 it had reverted to simply trying to 'muddle through'. Despite promises to modernise Germany (and particularly

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<sup>1</sup> See: K. Reif and H. Schmitt: 'Nine Second-Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results', *European Journal of Political Research*, 8/1 (1980): 3-44. One should, of course, add that in Greece, Belgium and Luxembourg it is compulsory to vote, so turnout rates are naturally much higher than elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> See C. Lees: 'The German Bundestag Election of September 2002' Oposing Europe Research Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 8 Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002) at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper8germany.pdf>

its economy), this pattern continued for at least 12 months after the 2002 election victory. The number of those unemployed subsequently continued to edge upwards and the economy further stagnated. As, in 2003, calls for a change of course grew ever louder, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder launched an economic and social welfare reform package (the *Agenda 2010*) that would – it was hoped – revitalise the economy as well as the SPD's position in the opinion polls. The SPD cut benefits for the long-term unemployed, tried to clear away much of the red tape that prevented employers from shedding labour when they needed to, reduced the level of service offered by Germany's generous health and welfare system and made a number of changes to the pension system. In neo-liberal terms, this was no 'Thatcherite' revolution: yet for many Germans it was tantamount to slaughtering holy cows. Rather than improve the SPD's standing with a sceptical (and not to mention cynical) electorate, the *Agenda 2010* actually contributed to a further drop in popularity for the social democrats, as they struggled to explain why such changes were necessary.

The debates on Schröder's reform package highlight some of Germany's most intractable problems. In large areas of public life and in significant segments of the political parties (above all in the SPD and CDU/CSU), Germany's economic problems do not just centre on questions of implementation, but of recognition and understanding. The message has not got through that Germany is dealing with deep-seated structural weaknesses – in terms of growth, an excessively costly welfare state, a dearth of incentives to work, and a lack of flexibility in the market. Even if the *Agenda 2010* represents a qualitative leap forward for German politics, and especially for the SPD, many people none the less saw *Agenda 2010* – and particularly some of the labour market reforms – as over-stepping the mark. Even SPD loyalists were heard to claim that the strategy was bereft of ideas, prospects and political instinct and a significant number of SPD members still believe that wages and levels of social support in Germany have risen *too little* than rather *too much*, leading domestic purchasing power to suffer on account of too much wage moderation.

By March 2004 the SPD was fighting hard to keep its reform agenda on track and its popularity in the polls slumped to a meagre 21% – an all-time low for Germany's oldest political party.<sup>3</sup> The SPD even became embroiled in questions of whether it was neglecting its own values and history by adopting such allegedly radical reform policies and the party found itself confronted with two prospective breakaway movements – the *Wahlalternative* ('The Alternative Choice') in Northrhine-Westphalia and *Initiative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit* ('Initiative for Labour and Social Justice') in the south German state of Bavaria. These organisations – called into life independently by disgruntled trade union activists – quickly came together to form one organisation. Although the 'Alternative Choice, Labour and Social Justice' did not put up any candidates for election – it had neither the time nor resources, having barely existed weeks earlier – it posed a real headache for the SPD, struggling as it was to explain why cuts in public expenditure were 'socially just' in the long run. In April only 14% of Germans were happy with the work of the SPD-led administration – 84% were not. 81% of Germans were worried/very worried about what the future might bring – only 14% looked ahead with any confidence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, March 2004 at [http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB\\_Maerz\\_I\\_2004/](http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB_Maerz_I_2004/)

<sup>4</sup> See: Infratest Dimap, May 2004 at <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/politik/deutschlandtrend/dt0406/default.htm>

In spite of the unexpected challenge and unpopularity of the *Agenda 2010*, the SPD did manage to improve its position in the polls before the final few weeks of vigorous campaigning: levels of support certainly did not rocket upwards though, with a mere 25% of Germans supporting the SPD in April and a slightly more encouraging 27% in May.<sup>5</sup> Small shoots of electoral recovery, perhaps, but the gale of an election campaign – as the SPD well knew – was likely to brutally blow them away. The SPD's coalition partner, Alliance 90/Greens, was largely able to distance itself from its unpopular coalition partner. The Greens – skilfully led by the talismanic foreign minister Joschka Fischer, consistently the most popular politician in the country, continued to linger around the 10% mark in the polls and were hopeful of avoiding the wave of protest that seemed sure to engulf the SPD.

The main opposition party – the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) – was naturally able to profit from the troubles of the SPD government and the disaffection rippling through German society. The CDU/CSU expected to win the 2002 federal election and was shocked when it failed to do so. CDU/CSU politicians did not take long to recover their composure, however, and by the late Autumn of 2002 the CDU/CSU led in the polls and was re-arming itself for further battles in future elections. The fact that many were unconvinced that they would do a better job remained a footnote: when the SPD needed to be punished in regional elections, the CDU/CSU was nearly always the main beneficiary. And the CDU/CSU hoped that the European election of June 2004 would be no different.

## **The Campaign**

European issues played at least some sort of role in the 1999 European Parliament election campaign. Germans discussed the advantages and disadvantages of whether their country should enter the eurozone. They also (hotly) debated whether sending German troops to Kosovo was to be condoned, and this issue was particularly prominent in the campaign rhetoric and literature of parties of the left (who were unambiguously against the idea). Somewhat surprisingly, there were no such Europe-specific issues to hand in 2004. The eastward expansion of the European Union was widely accepted as something that had happened and therefore did not merit further discussion. The newly agreed European constitution appeared to offer a real European issue with which the parties could beat each other with – but despite receiving coverage in the nether regions of the party manifestos, it never really hit the headlines during the campaign. The fact that only the PDS was explicitly against the constitution probably ensured that the other parties saw little interest in bringing it into the campaign. Not even the potentially explosive issue of whether, and under what circumstances, Turkey should be permitted to join the European Union made any great impact on the election as a whole, as the parties appeared to call a truce on this topic before campaigning seriously began.

In spite of the lack of genuine discussion of European issues, the manifestos and campaigns of the five main parties (SPD, CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens and PDS) still

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<sup>5</sup> See: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, April 2004 at [http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB\\_April\\_I\\_2004/](http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB_April_I_2004/); Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, May 2004 at [http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB\\_Mai\\_II\\_2004/](http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB_Mai_II_2004/)

differed significantly. Both of the main parties (SPD and CDU/CSU) produced relatively short programmes filled mostly with general policy goals as well as lofty aims and ambitions with which more or less everyone would agree. The three smaller parties produced longer documents with – at times – much more detailed policy proposals. The SPD was the first party to go on the campaign offensive, nominating its *Spitzenkandidat* (the first name on the party's electoral list and effective campaign figurehead), Martin Schultz, and producing its 'Manifesto for Europe' in November 2003. The programme covered plenty of territory, discussing amongst other things social policy, globalisation, security issues, pacifism, the environment and the future role of the EU in protecting hard won social rights. The CDU, with the leader of the European Peoples Party Hans-Gert Pöttering at its head, launched its programme in March 2004 and concentrated strongly on German-specific issues and themes. The motto of 'Europe 2004: Germany can do more' belied the fact that Europe was only of secondary importance in the CDU's campaign: explaining the alleged deficiencies of the SPD/Green administration in Berlin received much more significant coverage in all CDU literature, as well as in the speeches of CDU politicians. Although the Bavarian sister party of the CDU, the CSU, produced its own manifesto ('The CSU: For a Strong Bavaria in Europe') it did not in reality differ greatly – regionally directed polemics aside – from that of the CDU, focusing principally on national issues and the alleged failings of the Berlin government.

Like the SPD, the Greens also launched their manifesto at the end of 2003, with Rebecca Harms and, in particular, Daniel Cohn-Bendit as the leading figureheads. The German Greens were involved in the creation of the first genuinely Europe-wide political party (the European Green Party) that was launched in Rome in February 2004 and their election programme was seen as a manifesto for Green parties all across the new Europe. While this event is clearly of significance in the long-run, it is much more unclear how much German voters knew about it – and if they did whether it affected their voting decision in any way. The Green manifesto was 80 pages (compared to the SPD's 10) long and alongside the obligatory visionary talk there were a surprisingly large number of concrete proposals and policy suggestions. Unsurprisingly the environment and consumer protection were given plenty of room, as was education. The Greens called, for example, for the detailed labelling of foods to enable consumers to be aware of their origins and the creation of a scheme to enable different national qualifications to be understood and accepted across all EU member states.

The liberal Free Democrats (FDP) launched their manifesto ('FDP: We can do Europe better') in January 2004, although they did not nominate their *Spitzenkandidat* until March on account of the management committee of the FDP misinterpreting the rules for voting for him/her at their January convention. Silvana Koch-Mehrin – at 33 the youngest of the European figureheads of the major parties – led a campaign that focused on articulating policies that were laid out in detailed fashion in the manifesto. The FDP claimed it wanted to bring more market to the European economy and cut back many of the myriad of subsidies that exist and are seen as distorting free competition. The FDP called for the German government – and others who have contravened the rules – to abide by the financial guidelines of the European stability pact. The Liberals, like the CDU, also called for a referendum on the European constitution.

The PDS remained true to its socialist roots, calling for a radical change of course in both European and German handling of the economy and the welfare state. The PDS was once again led by Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann (the deputy leader of the GUE/NGL) and spent most of its time blustering against the neo-liberalisation and militarization of the EU. The PDS was the only party to actively speak out against the European constitution, even though some of its MEPs had actually abstained when the EP voted in the issue earlier in the year.

The mass of voters seemed largely unimpressed by any attempts to divert the campaign away from national issues – something that worked very much in the CDU/CSU's favour. Two of Germany's leading opinion poll agencies – Infratest Dimap and Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (FW) – confirmed that the majority of electors (56% in the case of Infratest, 57% with FW) saw national issues as more prevalent in shaping their voting intention than European ones. This continued even as election day approached and campaigning intensified. This is clearly nothing new although it is noticeable that CDU/CSU voters were the most likely (65%) to say that they cast their vote on the basis of national considerations.<sup>6</sup>

Apathy was the prevailing feeling through even the last week of campaigning, as politicians consummately failed to ignite the interest of the public. Over 60% of Germans claimed to have either no interest or very little interest in the election and its outcome, and only just over 3 in 10 claimed to be interested in politics at the European level at all. These figures stayed more or less constant through the election campaign. Interestingly (and perhaps worryingly), 78% of voters claimed that the issue of immigration (an issue that no party conceptualised in any detail during the campaign) was of importance in influencing their voting decision. Less unexpectedly 74% observed that their attitude to the government's *Agenda 2010* programme was important, while 73% named the Iraq war as being influential (although in what way, one cannot be sure). The CDU/CSU is likely to have profited from the immigration issue being of salience, just as the critical reception to the SPD's reform agenda should also have helped the centre-right while – certainly if the 2002 federal election is anything to go by – the governing coalition's refusal to condone the Iraq war should have improved its pacifist credentials.<sup>7</sup>

## Results and Analysis

In many ways the most noticeable part of the election was the apathy of many German voters towards it. Declining rates of turnout are not, however, phenomena specific merely to elections to the EP. The poor level of turnout at the 2004 election none the less offers further ammunition to those worried about the (un)willingness of Germans to participate in the electoral process. A participation rate of 43% represents the lowest ever rate of turnout for an election across the territory of the Federal Republic. This figure could also quite easily have been worse: over a third of Germans had the opportunity to cast votes not just in EP elections on June 13, but also in other regional or council elections that were held on the same day. This should –

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<sup>6</sup> See: Infratest Dimap, May 2004 at <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/politik/deutschlandtrend/dt0406/default.htm>; Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, June 2004 at [http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB\\_Juni\\_II\\_2004/](http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/PB_Juni_II_2004/)

<sup>7</sup> See the analysis produced by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen at <http://www.forschungsgruppewahlen.de/Ergebnisse/Politbarometer/>

theoretically at least – have increased the salience of decisions being made on that day and helped to boost turnout. The eastern state of Thuringia held a *Land* (regional) election, while the states of Baden-Württemberg, Mecklenburg Western Pomerania, Rheinland Palatinate, Saarland, Saxony and Saxony Anhalt all held elections to local councils. All of these states – with the exception of Saxony Anhalt – saw (often considerably) more citizens go to the polls on average than did states where just EP seats were up for grabs.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1<sup>9</sup>**  
**Turnout in Elections to the European Parliament in Germany (%)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>Turnout</b>	65.7	56.8	62.3	60.0	45.2	43.0

Those who did go to the polls send out an unambiguous message. They were not happy with the SPD's performance in the national government and the election proved – as all the indicators beforehand had indicated – to be a disaster for the Social Democrats. The SPD slumped to 21.5% of the popular vote, 9.2% lower than was the case in 1999. The SPD will therefore only be sending 23 members to the European Parliament, 10 fewer than it did in 1999. There is widespread consensus that the SPD fell victim to a widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the federal government. The government tried to claim that the reform programme it was implementing was in the interests of everyone, it just needed time to embed itself and then the benefits would become obvious. The voters seemed either unwilling to give a government that had been in office six years even more time and/or sceptical about the long-term effectiveness of the reforms implemented – and punished it accordingly.

When compared with its performance in the 2002 federal election, the SPD clearly suffered from voter abstention (over 10 million previous SPD voters did not bother going to the polls in 2004). But this was not a phenomenon unique to the SPD (although it did suffer the most as a result of it – see below). This – paradoxically – should offer the party at least a grain of hope for the 2006 federal election. A considerable number of these abstainers are likely to be SPD voters who have opted for a silent protest, rather than overtly switching to one of the SPD's competitors. This is likely to be cold comfort to the (relatively) new SPD triumvirate of Schröder, Party Chairman Franz Müntefering and General Secretary Klaus-Uwe Benneter. The task ahead of them is immense, and even if the economy finally starts to pick up it is likely that voters will take time to warm to the SPD again. As was commented on election night, the situation is not dissimilar to the UK in the 1990s: John Major's Conservative Party was expected to lose the 1992 election, yet somehow managed to grab victory from the jaws of defeat. While understandably joyous at his achievement, Major had also inadvertently sown the seeds of his own downfall in 1997, as voters

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<sup>8</sup> This is particularly noteworthy given that 4 of the 7 states mentioned are in eastern Germany, an area of the country that traditionally has *lower* turnout rates than the national average. The actual turnout rates in the EP polls were Rheinland Palatinate, 58.3%; Saarland 56.1%; Baden-Württemberg, 53.9%; Thuringia, 53.1%; Saxony 46.2%; Mecklenburg Western Pomerania, 45.5% and Saxony Anhalt 42.2%.

<sup>9</sup> See: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e. V. *Wahlergebnisse in Deutschland 1946-2003* (Mannheim: FW, 2003).

opted for the genuine change that they did not dare to go through with in 1992. The same logic may well haunt the SPD: Schröder turned the SPD's fortunes around in the Summer of 2002, principally by handling the twin crises of Iraq and the floods in eastern Germany so effectively. Even if similar election-saving issues appear on the agenda in 2006 it is doubtful whether he will be able to pull off the same trick twice.

**Table 2**  
**Results of the Elections to the EP in Germany**  
**June 13 2004**

	2 <sup>nd</sup> Votes, 2004		2 <sup>nd</sup> Votes, 1999		Difference 2004 – 1999 (in per cent)
	Number	%	Number	%	
Turnout	26,525,514	43.0	27,468,932	45.2	-2.2
CDU/CSU	11,475,573	44.5	13,168,231	48.7	-4.2
SPD	5,549,243	21.5	8,307,085	30.7	-9.2
B90/Gr	3,078,276	11.9	1,741,494	6.4	5.5
PDS	1,579,693	6.1	1,567,745	5.8	0.3
FDP	1,565,000	6.1	820,371	3.0	3.0
REP	485,691	1.9	461,038	1.7	0.2
Die Animal Protection Party	331,270	1.3	185,186	0.7	0.6
The Grey Party	314,204	1.2	112,142	0.4	0.8
Others	1,401,823	5.5	695,981	2.6	2.9

Alongside the 'SPD abstainers', there were plenty of social democrat voters from 2002 who did vote – and indeed voted against the SPD: 830,000 opted for the CDU/CSU, 390,000 for the Greens, 220,000 for the PDS and 60,000 for the FDP. These shifts help explain a number of things: the PDS's stronger showing in western Germany, where it polled its highest ever share of the vote (1.6%), and the Greens' convincing performance across the whole country, benefiting from dissatisfaction with its national coalition partner.<sup>10</sup>

The CDU claimed to be highly satisfied with the results and saw them as ample evidence of a shift in preferences away from red-green and towards the parties of the centre-right. The CDU gained voters not just from the SPD, but also from the Greens (30,000) and its prospective partner at the national level, the FDP (10,000). Interestingly, it lost 100,000 voters to the PDS and it too suffered from the drop in voter participation with over 7.5 million CDU supporters (from 2002) not voting. There are, however, a couple of small clouds on the CDU/CSU's horizon. Although the SPD was unpopular, the CDU/CSU did not improve on its percentage of the vote vis-à-vis 1999: in fact, its vote share was down by 4.2%. And while voters were

<sup>10</sup> See the Konard Adenauer Foundation's election report at [http://www.kas.de/publikationen/2004/4813\\_dokument.html](http://www.kas.de/publikationen/2004/4813_dokument.html)

disgruntled with the Social Democrats, they were hardly delirious about the CDU/CSU. In Forschungsgruppe Wahlen's monthly surveys on political attitudes voters are regularly asked to give their satisfaction with the government and opposition parties: in June 2004 the CDU/CSU polled -0.3 (scale +5 to -5), its lowest rating since the 2002 federal election. Only one in four voters thought that the CDU/CSU would actually do a better job than the SPD/Green coalition – a clear sign that the CDU/CSU was benefiting as much from protest as it was from conviction, and a warning to the party that it certainly should not take an election victory in 2006 for granted.<sup>11</sup>

The Greens were able to take a number of positives from the election. Alongside winning over 380,000 SPD voters, the Greens gained support from 50,000 former FDP voters – an interesting development given the considerable ideological difference between the liberal, small-state, low tax FDP and the essentially social democratic Greens. These gains were mitigated by the loss of over a million voters from 2002 who stayed at home; the loss of 30,000 voters to the CDU/CSU; the loss of 150,000 to the PDS and 130,000 to other parties, most noticeably the Animal Protection League, which almost doubled its vote share when compared with 1999. Alliance 90/Green performed much better in post-materialist western Germany than it did in the East, and it continues to find it difficult to pick up votes across the so-called *neue Länder*. The Greens successfully managed to distance themselves from the SPD, partly as the SPD fought many of its internal battles on the *Agenda 2010* in public, leaving the impression that the party was divided and wrapped with its own internal problems. The Greens once again called on Joschka Fischer to help increase the party's profile and they avoided making any notable gaffes during the campaign – something that Green party members (not to mention ministers) have been prone to do in the past.

The FDP and the PDS both made substantial gains, although – when compared with the 2002 federal election – the FDP *lost* voters to all other significant parties with the exception of the SPD. The successful retention of more of its committed voter base still ensured that the FDP almost doubled its share of the vote compared to 1999 and the Free Democrats will be quietly satisfied that they are finally able to re-enter the Strasbourg Parliament that they left in 1989. The FDP did much better in western Germany than it did in the eastern states: its best performance in eastern Germany came in Saxony Anhalt – the one state where the FDP have traditionally done well in the eastern states – and even there it only polled 5.6%. In western Germany the FDP did particularly well in Hesse (7.6%) and Northrhein Westphalia (7.5%) although it managed to clear the 5% barrier everywhere except Bavaria and the Saarland. The Free Democrats have quietly recovered from the unhappy election of 2002 when the FDP seemed uneasy with itself, as well as the controversy that surrounded the late Jürgen Möllemann's (who has since died in a parachuting accident in 2003) views on the Arab-Israeli peace process. In 2004 the FDP quietly went about its business, arguing clearly and convincingly for a reformist, free-market-orientated economic rejuvenation of Germany and avoiding debilitating personal disagreements.

The PDS – as has always been the case, successfully got its core vote in eastern Germany out and suffered the least from the voter apathy that hit the other parties. The PDS registered 22.9% of the vote in the five eastern states and Berlin, but only

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFde/mediathek/0,1903,SS-2019531,00.html>

1.6% in western Germany. This 1.6% is none the less notable for two reasons: (1) it represents the PDS's best ever showing in western Germany at a national election (up from 0.9% at the 2002 federal election) and (2) these votes are still crucial in helping the PDS gain enough votes to register the all-important 5% needed to guarantee representation in the EP. Had the PDS needed to rely on the votes it received in eastern Germany alone, it would have fallen just short (4.8%). From a psychological point of view it was also important for PDS activists and members that the party bounced back convincingly after its dismal showing in the 2002 federal election: and it did, polling roughly the same number of votes as the FDP and sending 7 representatives to Strasbourg (up from 6 in the last legislative period). These are – in the truest sense of the term – a mixed group of individuals, with very differing biographies. Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann, for example, is a trained Sinologist who has long been active for the PDS in the international arena; Sahra Wagenknecht the enigmatic spokesperson of the Communist Platform within the PDS; Andre Brie the long-time election campaigner and important reforming force; Gabi Zimmer a former leader of the party; Tobias Pflüger a vocal and prominent pacifist with his roots in the western German peace movement. The PDS was able to increase its share of the vote in 9 of the 10 western states (Hamburg – where the PDS has been in disarray for a number of years – being the only exception). But where there is a silver lining, there is normally also a cloud. The PDS still polled 300,000 fewer votes than it did in the 2002 federal election and in the two states where the PDS is currently in regional government (Berlin and Mecklenburg Western Pomerania) it registered a worse percentage of the vote than it did in the EP elections of 1999 (down 2.3% and 2.7% respectively). Government participation – even if it is only at the regional level – may well continue to hit the PDS hard in those regions and may pose (given the strength of the PDS in MWP and Berlin) a real threat to the party's aim of returning to the Bundestag in 2006.

Unlike elsewhere in Europe, there was no significant expression of anti-EU sentiment in the campaign or in the behaviour of voters. Even parties that are (very) critical of the processes and politics of the EU (such as the PDS) remain unambiguously supportive of the EU project. There remains a widespread pro-European consensus in Germany, particularly at the elite level, and a German version of UKIP would have failed miserably at the polls. The nearest equivalents – the Republicans and the National Democratic Party – polled 1.9% and 0.9% of the vote respectively, and remain very much on the edge of political life.

## **Conclusion and Future Prospects**

The EP election in Germany was actually a rather quiet affair. The main issues in the campaign were national in scope and this worked very much against the incumbent SPD. European issues were, at best, secondary, and it was not infrequent for them to be overlooked altogether. This is partly due to the fact that German elites remain remarkably united in their attitudes to the EU: the pro-European consensus pervades all of the major parties, even the anti-capitalist PDS, and criticisms of the EU tend to be guarded and decidedly practical in nature. The EU therefore does not tend to be as divisive an issue as it is in a number of other countries.

Be that as it may, the national political climate in Germany remains one of pessimism and disaffection with a government struggling to come to terms with the demands

placed on it. The SPD was punished for the deficiencies it has displayed in economic management and in the lack of vision it has shown in taking Germany forward. The opposition parties were perfectly placed to make gains in this election, falling as it does in the mid-term of the electoral cycle.

This is not to say that the CDU/CSU already has the 2006 national election sown up. It is not yet seen as a problem-solving, forward-thinking force that can drag Germany out of its socio-economic malaise. It needs to pick the right candidate to challenge the telegenic and slick Gerhard Schröder – something it did not do in 2002, when Edmund Stoiber struggled to win over Northern German voters in particular. In second order elections opposition parties naturally do well. In first order (i.e. national) elections the opposition's policies and personalities are put under a much more searching microscope and data produced by polling agencies has revealed that although the CDU/CSU was clearly able to benefit from SPD errors in the 2004 EP elections, it is not yet in a position to confidently predict it will win when it really matters.

*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>*