**The SPD at the Bundestagswahl 2017: *Die Hoffnung stirbt zuletzt*?**

As one of the Germany’s two *Volksparteien*, the SPD’s great hope, indeed its *raison d’être*, is to lead the German government. And, for 20 of the post-war years, it has done precisely that, under chancellors Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, and Gerhard Schröder. However, since losing the chancellorship in 2005, the party has held two unenviable roles, either serving as the junior partner of Angela Merkel’s CDU in a grand coalition (from 2005 to 2009, and from 2013 to 2017), or forming the opposition.

A year before the elections, the SPD looked to be in a difficult position. Although Angela Merkel was under some domestic pressure (notably that arising from the refugee crisis of 2015), the SPD did not appear to be benefiting. It had chalked up some policy successes (such as the introduction of a national minimum wage), but its position as minor coalition partner put it between a rock and a hard place: those who supported the government’s pragmatic, centrist agenda would back its leading party, the CDU/CSU, while those who criticised the government from the left were not attracted to supporting a governing party. Indeed, the fragmentation of the German left (particularly with a growth in support for the Left Party) has been a major problem for the SPD, a process to which Chancellor Schröder’s package of welfare retrenchment, the Hartz reforms, served as a catalyst.

Then, in early 2017, the party unexpectedly announced that Martin Schulz, the Speaker of the European Parliament and former leader of the Social Democrat group (S&D) there, would be the candidate for chancellor and would also take over the party leadership. The party enjoyed an immediate bounce in the polls: Schulz took the lead over Merkel as the preferred choice of chancellor in the polls in February and March, and he was elected unanimously to the leadership at the party conference in March 2017. It looked like Schulz might combine personal dynamism and political experience with being “untainted” by direct involvement in the grand coalition or indeed the Hartz reforms under Schröder.

However, this proved to be the high point of the SPD’s campaign. It lost three state elections – in the Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, and most bruising, in Schulz’s home state of North Rhine Westphalia. The SPD dropped back in the polls. Any possibility of forming a Red-Red-Green coalition with the Greens and the Left Party receded (although it was never formally ruled out), and the only viable option to continue in government appeared a further term as Merkel’s junior partner. This became rather painfully obvious in the TV debate between Schulz and Merkel, where commentators noted the similarity of their positions. Tensions between the Bundestag group and Schulz occasionally surfaced, and Schulz periodically stumbled over issues of domestic policy (cf. Der Spiegel 2017a). Voters, though, repeatedly told pollsters they were unclear what the SPD stood for, especially how, in concrete terms, it would promote social justice (Tagesschau 2017). At one stage in the campaign, Martin Schulz, perhaps rather opportunistically, sought to attack Angela Merkel on refugee policy, stating that she was silent about coming problems (Focus 2017). This did not appear to bring the SPD any benefit, and indeed may have rather legitimated the AfD’s stance on the issue. He also accused Merkel of undermining democracy by avoiding political arguments (Der Spiegel 2017b) – criticising political opponents for not campaigning in the way you favour is not an indication of programmatic strength.

In fact, the SPD’s difficulties are a very clear exemplification of social democrats’ difficulties across western Europe. These are rather neatly presented by Kitschelt (1999) as three dilemmas. He highlights a “political economic” dilemma, whereby social democrats need to embrace centrist economic policies in order to appear economically credible, but the consequences of these alienate some sections of their core vote. They face an “electoral” dilemma – if they shift leftwards, they will gain votes at the expense of minor left-wing parties, but lose the “median” voter (or, more precisely, legislator) and not have the ability to form a coalition. And they face an “organisational” dilemma: they can stick with traditional mass party structures, which are stable and help capture the “core” vote but are rather immobile and unenterprising, or they can reform such structures, making them more flexible, but also more volatile and unpredictable.

When the results came in, they were a disaster, with the SPD’s vote share of 20.5% representing a historic post-war low. The party immediately ruled out going back into coalition with the CDU/CSU, to the relief of many party members. It was reported that 23% was the “threshold”, below which a further grand coalition would not be considered (Die Welt 2017). However, with the collapse of talks to form a “Jamaica” coalition of CDU/CSU, Greens and FDP, the SPD’s leadership and party conference reluctantly agreed to exploratory talks about being part of a future government, either as a formal coalition partner (perhaps with looser coalition discipline), or in supporting a CDU/CSU minority government.

In looking at the SPD’s results, several weaknesses stand out. First, the party continued to lose through the fragmentation of the German left, with over 800,000 former voters defecting to the Left Party and the Greens – the combined total of the three parties was nearly 40%, not enough to form a coalition, but an indication of the cost of fragmentation to the SPD.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, the party also lost significant ground to the Alternative for Germany and the liberal FDP.

These difficulties are also highlighted by the demographic breakdown of the German vote: amongst those in an “economically precarious” position, the party scored 23%, just one point ahead of the AfD on 22%, with the CDU/CSU on 18% and the Left Party on 15%. Amongst “working class” voters, the party also scored 23% (AfD 22%, CDU/CSU 25%, Left 10%). This highlights just how far the SPD’s one-time “core” clientele had fragmented, with support going to the populist right, to the far left and indeed to the CDU/CSU. At the same time, amongst voters with a higher level of education, the party scored just 18% (with the Greens securing 14% and the Left Party 10%). The SPD thus failed to cement its “core” vote, but also underperformed amongst potential “New Left” social democratic voters.

A striking failure of the SPD was in the former East. Here, the party scored just 13.9%, in fourth place behind the CDU/CSU (27.6%), AfD (21.9%) and Left Party (17.8%). If east German voters were important in the SPD’s victories in 1998 and 2002, (35.1% and 39.7% respectively), the party’s implosion there presents a serious problem.

Moreover, it was clear that voters were not persuaded by the SPD’s offering in terms of personnel or policy. When asked to choose between Merkel and Schulz as chancellor, 52% went for Merkel, just 33% for Schulz, the latter score lower even that the 34% who preferred Peer Steinbrück in 2013 – a far cry from the party’s expectations just months before. Just 15% attributed to Schulz the quality of being a strong leader (Merkel 75%), 17% found him more competent (Merkel 66%); the only quality on which he led Merkel was that of being “close to citizens” (Schulz 58%, Merkel 27%). 80% of voters agreed with the statement that “The SPD is not clear what it will do for social justice”, 74% felt it “lacked a core topic with which to motivate people”, and 58% said it did not “do enough for the weakest in society”. In each of these cases, the constraint of being in a grand coalition with the CDU/CSU is apparent. In terms of issues, the party’s competence was reasonably highly regarded with respect to pay and social policies, but far weaker on refugees (20% - with Schulz intervention in this regard having been a failure) or the economy (17%).

After such a disappointing result, with the SPD’s loss of seats compounded by the greater number of parties in the Bundestag (the party was down to just 153 from 193), it clearly needed to regroup. The immediate post-election period was dominated by the party’s decision to rule out involvement in a grand coalition (a stance questioned by former chancellor Schröder and the party’s Bundestag leader up to the election, Thomas Oppermann). It also tried to avoid providing a negative backdrop for the state election in Lower Saxony in October 2017 in which, somewhat contrary to expectations, it chalked up a victory, with the SPD under Minister President Stefan Weil comfortably topping the poll.

However, and perhaps inevitably after such a disappointing result, the party also engaged in some internal, rather argumentative reshuffles. Schulz’ short-term survival seemed secure, in spite of the poor result, but Andrea Nahles (the former labour minister and nominally a party left-winger) took over as Bundestag leader from Oppermann (a role that might have been taken by Schulz himself); Carsten Schneider, a member of the centrist Seeheimer faction, took over as Bundestag business leader, and Lars Klingbeil, another “Seeheimer”, was designated to be the new General Secretary; the party’s “business leader” Juliane Seifert announced she would resign after she heard through the media that Schulz was seeking to replace her. Thomas Oppermann was appointed to Bundestag Vice President, as a consolation prize for being displaced as the party’s Bundestag leader, but secured just 61% of SPD parliamentarians’ votes in the nomination meeting. Several party voices complained that the leadership now looked disconcertingly male, and centrist, and also complained at the “behind closed doors” nature of the appointment process (Michal 2017).

Where, then, does this leave the SPD? Some in the party point to the need for a leftward shift ideologically, but its only credible route back to power involves taking part in a grand coalition, risking further alienation of more left-wing supporters and strengthening other parties. In terms of sharpening its ideological appeal, too, the party faces some awkward dilemmas which have the potential to drive a further wedge between its working class “core vote” and more liberal-minded middle-class supporters: refugee policy, the stance on the motor industry and coal power, and indeed economic policy all spring to mind. Pressure to reform its internal organisation (responding to Kitschelt’s organisational dilemma) is likely to be hard to resist: indeed, Schulz has already announced a series of conferences about party renewal, though where this will lead is not clear: there is, however, some demand amongst members for decisions on key personnel to be the subject of internal ballots rather than simply seeing decisions taken in private by senior members rubber-stamped in uncontested elections at party conference.

In conclusion, two points are striking: first, in terms of renewing its personnel, key figures at the regional level may well be relevant: Stefan Weil’s stock has grown since his election victory in Lower Saxony, Olaf Scholz, the Mayor of Hamburg and former General Secretary, remains a key figure, and in particular Manuela Schwesig, the Minister President of Mecklenburg Western Pomerania and a Deputy Leader nationally, may well be key players in the future. Secondly, the combination of centrist welfare policies pursued during the Schröder era and extensive involvement in grand coalitions under Merkel have served both to alienate sections of the SPD’s support and leave the party with an unclear programmatic orientation; the prospect of remedying this problem looks especially difficult as a potential partner in a grand coalition, but even a move into opposition would not, on its own, provide the SPD with all its answers.

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1. All references here are to the Infratest Dimap exit poll, available Tagesschau (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)