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## Democratic Indecision: Germany's Two Chancellors

By Jill Winder

SEPTEMBER 23, 2005

BERLIN—Just after 6 p.m. on September 18, I sat with three friends in a Berlin apartment. The election-night gathering was more of an excuse to get together than anything else, and one of us had even suggested renting a DVD as back-up entertainment, should the results prove too boring or depressing to watch for long. But as the first exit poll numbers appeared on the TV screen, we were shocked, excited and puzzled in turn. No one—not the political pundits, opinion polls, forecasters or the candidates themselves—had foreseen the outcome.

In May, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) suffered a crushing defeat in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, a traditional stronghold. Visibly shaken at the time, Schröder announced, "The bitter result... jeopardizes the political basis for the continuation of our task." In a move called "political suicide" even by members of his own party, Schröder deliberately lost a vote of confidence in the German Parliament in July and called for early elections. At that time, and indeed up to about three weeks before the election, the center-right Christian Democrats (CDU) were showing a significant (at least 15 percent) lead in the opinion polls. The CDU's margin narrowed as the election grew closer, but it seemed a *fait accompli* that Christian Democrat Angel Merkel would be Germany's next chancellor.

By the evening of the election, all bets were off. The coalition of the Christian Democrats and its sister party, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) had received just 35.2 percent, while against all odds, Gerhard Schröder's beleaguered Social Democrats stood at 34.3 percent. According to government figures, nearly 78 percent of Germany's eligible voters cast their ballots, and 51.1 percent voted for left-of-center parties.<sup>1</sup> Immediately, TV commentators added up the figures and hypothesized about potential coalitions and odd bedfellows. Confusion reigned but one thing was clear: Schröder's governing SPD-Green Party coalition had lost, but the CDU/CSU had not won.

On TV, coverage of election night was part circus, and part quiz show. Commentators interviewed visibly shaken party representatives from the CDU, while images from the SPD election-night festivities in Berlin showed jubilant supporters still stunned by their party's impressive comeback. Openly bewildered political analysts tried to add up the numbers and theorize about possible outcomes. Then came the candidates. First Angela Merkel appeared. Looking deflated and dumbstruck, the most positive rallying cry she could muster in a faltering voice was, "We are proud to say that we are the strongest political faction in the country, and it is our job to try to form a stable government for Germany." By contrast, Chancellor Schröder bounded on stage before supporters beaming with jubilation, appearing wholly vindicated. "I'm proud of the German people," he thundered, clasping his hands in victory over his head, "I'm proud that our democratic culture has prevailed instead of the manipulation of the media... No one

<sup>1</sup> Source: [www.bundestag.de/wahl2005/](http://www.bundestag.de/wahl2005/)

but me has the ability and the mandate to build a stable government in Germany and I will lead it over the next four years...Those who thought they could have a new chancellor have failed grandiosely.”

Almost immediately after Schröder’s comments, reporters scrambled to comprehend what he said, some openly questioning if he had fully taken in the election results. The SPD had lost...so what scenario could the Chancellor possibly be imagining? Soon, various coalition possibilities (some conceivable, some pure fantasy) flashed on the screen, deftly turning the election data into multi-colored pie charts. There were four options: a “grand coalition” between the CDU and SPD; the “Ampel” (traffic light) coalition of the SPD, Green Party and Free Democratic Party (FDP); the “Jamaica” coalition of the CDU, FDP and Green Party; or the Red-Red-Green coalition of the SPD, Green Party and Left Party. Each of these options presented problems.

A grand coalition was the simplest solution, yet most people believed it would create a stalemate, leaving neither party with enough power to pursue its significantly different reform agenda. Before the election, both the CDU and SPD had rejected such a compromise. Analysts also feared that a grand coalition would only increase voters’ support for the smaller, more radical parties on both the left and right of the political spectrum. This prediction seemed especially apt, given that the right-wing, free-market-oriented FDP and the communist Left Party both enjoyed significant gains in this election (with 9.8 percent and 8.7 percent respectively).

One alternative, the “Ampel” coalition (so named because the parties’ colors are red, yellow and green) was unlikely because it would force the FDP, which had vig-



Chancellor Schröder during the post-election “Berliner Runde” discussion on September 18. His tirades and general impoliteness led Guido Westerwelle, Chairman of the FDP Party, to ask Schröder on live television if he had been drinking. Photo: AP

orously campaigned against Schröder’s government, to join him in the governing coalition. The “Jamaica” (black, yellow, green) coalition posed the same problem, necessitating the left-liberal Green Party to rule with one of its longtime enemies, the CDU. And finally, the Red-Red-Green coalition also seemed untenable, since Schröder had stated many times that he would not consider ruling with the communist Left Party. In short, any of the above configurations would require enormous compromise (and some say betrayal) of each party’s fundamental positions.

Confusion and speculation only intensified after the surreal performance of Schröder during the election-night “Berliner Runde” (Berlin Circle, also called the “Elephant Circle”) broadcast on TV-station ZDF. This traditional face-off among chancellor candidates and the leaders of major parties happens around 8 p.m., when the results become clear. Usually, party leaders face each other as clear winners or losers, and although direct confrontation is possible, my friends told me they had never seen a Berliner Runde quite like the one that night. Moderators Hartmann von der Tann and Nikolaus Brender tried desperately to control the discussion while Schröder made outrageous statements and interrupted every speaker in turn. The Chancellor, famed for his arrogance, was absolutely glib, relentlessly proclaiming his victory and pointing out Merkel’s “personal failure.” Meanwhile Merkel appeared to shrink in her seat and stared off blankly into the distance, snapping back to attention only when a question was directed to her.

Responding to Schröder’s tirade, Von der Tann said, “You have spoken fighting words here. First, that you plan to remain Chancellor. Second that you reject a grand coalition. Mr. Westerwelle has said that the FDP will not join an SPD coalition, you’ve said you won’t share power with the Left Party...I can’t understand then how you possibly imagine building a government under your leadership.” Schröder smiled condescendingly and replied, “The German people have clearly voted on the question



of who should be Chancellor, and no one can seriously debate that Mrs. Merkel lost. I will say this: There will be no coalition under Merkel's leadership that includes the SPD." Guido Westerwelle, Chairman in the Bundestag for the FDP, whose 9.8 percent share of the vote made his party one of the big winners of the night, responded in a civilized and honest way, making Schröder appear even more unhinged by comparison. "This is a difficult hour for you, Chancellor Schröder," Westerwelle said laughing and looking rather taken aback, "With all due respect, the triumphant show you're putting on here cannot be taken seriously. The campaign is over and I think it's time to speak respectfully with one another. Germany is a democracy—the party that has the majority is charged with forming a coalition..." When Schröder interrupted, Westerwelle concluded succinctly, "I hate to spoil your good mood but we will not help you stay in power... We will not prolong this misery or the life of the SPD-Green government."<sup>2</sup>

### Countdown to the Vote

In the weeks leading up to the election, the CDU's lead narrowed dramatically. The tides turned against Angela Merkel quickly. A number of factors led to the CDU's miserable election results. One turning point was a televised debate between Merkel and Schröder on September 4. Although commentators noted that Merkel performed much better than expected, that was not saying much since expectations were so low. Twenty-one million viewers tuned in to the debate and the majority of those polled felt Schröder had outperformed Merkel and was a more convincing leader. Another blunder made by Merkel was to introduce Dr. Paul Kirchhof, an economics professor, as her future finance minister. Kirchhof is a strong proponent of radical tax reform that would basically introduce a flat tax in Germany. In combination with Merkel's intention to raise Germany's value-added tax, voters came to see her platform as aggressively anti-social and unfair to lower-income earners. Schröder masterfully attacked Kirchhof's policies, painting him as the poster boy of CDU radicalism and injustice. When the embattled Merkel tried to distance herself from Kirchhof, it only made her look more weak and untrustworthy to voters.

In my opinion, Merkel also made a mistake by not arguing convincingly about her concern for women's issues, such as fair pay or child-care benefits. She did not appeal to women voters, something that might have solidified her support base, and refused to defend herself against comments made by Schröder's wife Doris Schröder-Kopf, who created a stir when she accused the childless Merkel of having no sense of family or the experiences of "the majority of women who have to balance work and family life." Merkel also failed to cash in on an obvious campaign tool in eastern Germany—that

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Although the campaign grew more and more aggressive and personal in the weeks leading up to the election, there was no lack of good jokes, political cartoons and other distractions as the campaign heated up. When I needed a break from the endless speculation and political commentary, I headed to a popular website that has become a favorite since its debut in 2001: [www.bundesdance.com](http://www.bundesdance.com). This hilarious site features three prominent political figures, Chancellor Schröder, Angela Merkel and Edmund Stoiber. To enter the site, click on the link that reads, "Hier geht's zum Bundesdance!" and then select the politician of your choice. Various links to change the background, music and dance moves alter the scene. I encourage anyone with an interest in German politics, especially after this astonishing election, to have a look—the absurdity of seeing the Chancellor or our Angel Merkel hitting the dance floor is oddly entertaining.



*(Above) A view from the uproarious [www.bundesdance.com](http://www.bundesdance.com), showing CDU candidate Angela Merkel cutting a rug with a crowd of East Germans on her left and Edmund Stoiber (CSU) and Chancellor Schröder on her right. (Below) Chancellor Schröder takes his turn on the dance floor at [www.bundesdance.com](http://www.bundesdance.com). To the right, the Berlin Wall appears as a "decorative" detail and he is taunted by the leaders of the FDP, a right-liberal party whose campaign *raison d'être* was to force the SPD out of power.*



<sup>1</sup> A video stream of this remarkable debate can be accessed at: [http://www.tagesschau.de/video/0,1315,OID4766940\\_RESreal256\\_PLYinternal\\_NAV\\_BAB,00.html](http://www.tagesschau.de/video/0,1315,OID4766940_RESreal256_PLYinternal_NAV_BAB,00.html)



*The SPD rally on September 16 gets underway in the center of Berlin at the Gendarmenmarkt.*

she is from the east herself. The CDU managed to get only 25.3 percent of the votes in eastern Germany (25.4 percent voted for the communist Left Party), by all accounts a shockingly poor result. When Merkel campaigned in the east, she failed to sympathize or relate to people, often distancing herself by saying “the people here” instead of “we,” repeatedly refusing to acknowledge her roots. Her position was also severely compromised by CSU party head Edmund Stoiber, who was quoted more than once saying, “The German election will not and must not be decided by frustrated East Germans.”

On September 16, two days before the election, I attended the final public rallies of the SPD and Left Party in Berlin to observe the last gasp of the SPD and Schröder’s incredible campaign, which had been waging a ruthless fight in the final weeks. The SPD rally was held on Berlin’s Gendarmenmarkt, one of the most beautiful squares in the city, a setting that added a whiff of tradition and authority to the proceedings. A large stage was set up with the SPD campaign slogan, “Trust in Germany” prominently displayed, and two giant video screens projected the action on-stage to the crowd. People milled around holding red SPD balloons, picked up free ponchos to shield themselves from the rain and chatted. Though I don’t think anyone expected the strong election results that would come, the mood was high.

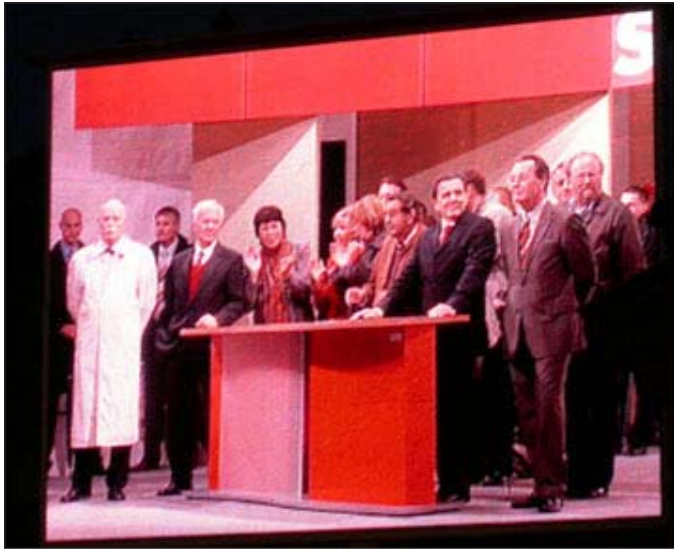
One young mother I spoke to ex-

plained why she bothered to come, “Schröder has been brave in trying to reform what needs to be reformed, but he has done it with the human consequences in mind. I want to live in a country with a strong economy, but not one that sacrifices its principles and traditions to get it.” Others noted that a major factor for their continuing support of Schröder despite Germany’s poor economic situation was his stance against the Iraq war and President Bush. A student at the nearby Humboldt university put it this way, “At least Schröder showed that Germany is an independent country that stands by what is right. Bush has created a mess for himself and his allies, and I’m proud to say that Schröder avoided that catastrophe. We have enough problems here to deal with.”

Around 7:30 p.m. the crowd cheered as Schröder and his entourage emerged from the classy and bustling Lutter & Wegner, one of the best restaurants in Berlin, and made their way across the street to the rally shielded by large green umbrellas. Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit spoke first, proclaiming, “I want to thank Chancellor Schröder and our party for this remarkable campaign. He who does not fight has already lost, and we have proven our strength and resolve.” Nobel Prize winner Günther Grass then stepped up to the podium and gave an impassioned speech hailing Schröder for keeping Germany out of “Bush’s disastrous war” and warning that Angela Merkel is the leader of a “danger-



*A sea of SPD supporters crowd into the square, holding red SPD balloons, many of which read “Women for Schröder.”*



*(Left) Standing on the stage at the SPD rally, projected for the crowd on large video screens, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder flanked by his wife Doris, author and Nobel Prize winner Günther Grass and party leader Franz Müntefering look on as Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit speaks. (Right) Nobel Prize winner Günther Grass gives a fiery speech in support of Schröder at the SPD rally to wild applause.*

ous neo-liberal gang.” Grass campaigned almost as hard for Gerhard Schröder as did Schröder himself, and his emotional speech almost overshadowed the Chancellor’s resolute but diplomatic call to arms that followed.

A few blocks away, another rally was going on, and those in attendance would also have cause to celebrate their party’s gains two days later. The newly-formed Left Party is made up of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), successor to East Germany’s Communist Party (SED), led by the charismatic Gregor Gysi — and Oskar Lafontaine’s Election Alternative for Work and Social Justice (WASAG). The Left Party’s program opposes labor reforms and cuts in social benefits, and wants taxation and industrial-policy reform to address the specific economic problems in east Germany. Resonating with “ostalgie” (a term meaning “nostalgia for the East”), the

rally was held on the Schloßplatz in front of the soon-to-be-demolished shell of the East German Palace of the Republic where the East German parliament voted for reunification with West Germany in 1990.

In marked contrast to the SPD gathering, the Left Party hosted a low-tech affair, with makeshift tents sheltering supporters and an amateur band entertaining people before leading politicians made their appearance. The best way I can describe the mood in the crowd is fearful. People were full of fear: About the unemployment-benefit cuts of Schröder’s Hartz IV reforms, about social injustice, about the “forgotten” parts of east Germany, and above all about the future. Markus, a student at the Technical University in Berlin, grew up in northern Germany and is studying to be an engineer. He was full of disillusionment and didn’t expect things to get better,



*(Left) View of the Left Party’s pre-election day rally on September 16. The Left Party is a coalition made up of the remnants of East Germany’s Communist Party, and as such, the rally’s location in front of the GDR Palast der Republik, the former seat of the East German Parliament, was ripe with significance. (Right) Left Party supporters wait around in the rain at the rally for party leader Lothar Bisky to speak, listening to a German reggae band.*



*People drink beer and peruse party literature at the Left Party rally.*

or his prospects to improve. “My parents worked hard when I was a kid, and they are wasting away now with nothing to do. How do you start again when you’re 45? They’ll be on unemployment for the rest of their lives,” Markus said. “As for me, I used to laugh when they said things were better in the GDR and I’m coming to realize they have a point. I’m studying a subject that should guarantee me a job, but I don’t even hope for that any more. The idea of making enough money to live on seems impossible. I’m voting for these guys because they see that we need a social network. People need to be taken care of and given a chance to work, have a life. At the moment, so many people can’t do that most basic thing.”

The Left Party emerged from the voting as the strongest left-wing party in the Bundestag after the SPD (with 8.7 percent compared to the Green Party’s 8.1 percent): a remarkable result. After the election, Andreas Pinkwart, the FDP deputy governor of North Rhine-Westphalia noted somewhat enviously that the Left Party somehow “managed to become a melting pot for protest votes from every direction on the map.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did the Left Party

gain 25 percent of the votes in east Germany, it also managed to earn almost 5 percent of the vote in western Germany—an unexpected result, since many mainstream politicians had written the Left Party off as a party with exclusively “east” appeal.

### Casting My Vote

At around noon on election day, I accompanied a friend to the polls. Out of frustration, he had vowed not to cast another ballot for Schröder and the SPD, but as the race became tighter and a conservative government no longer seemed inevitable, he debated throwing in a vote for the SPD. Germans have two votes (or “Stimmen”—directly translated, “voices”): The first for a local candidate, and the second for a party to represent them in parliament. My friend walked into the voting booth and cast a Green-Red vote, adding one much-needed vote for the SPD. Three days before the election, pollsters reported that as many as 30 percent of German voters remained undecided. Results showed that the CDU was an overwhelming loser with this significant portion of the electorate, who at the end of the day cast their ballots for the SPD or one of the smaller parties (the FDP and Left Party were large beneficiaries of these last-minute votes).

After following the campaign so closely, I did not want to be left out. So we walked two blocks from the official voting station to an art space called Kunstbank to participate in a project called *Wahlen für Ausländer* (Voting for Foreigners). Kunstbank exhibits the work of artists who receive a scholarship from the Berlin Senate. Many artists who receive the scholarship are foreigners,



*On election day, people mill around Kunstbank and cast their votes. Photo: Kunstbank*

<sup>3</sup> “The Left is Moving West,” *Der Spiegel*, September 20, 2005.

and Christiane von Gilsa, project director of Kunstbank, wanted to make the multicultural character of Berlin's art scene apparent, and give a voice (if only symbolically) to interested parties.

I was given a voting sheet that looked exactly like the official ones, and directed into a private booth where I cast my vote. The proportional voting system in Germany lends itself to a lot of strategic voting (my friend being a case in point), but I decided to cast my ballot without such strategizing in mind. Perhaps this is because I am accustomed to seeing my Democratic votes tossed into the dustbin of history in my home state of Utah, or perhaps, as my friend grumbled, I was just trying to torture him for voting as he ideally would have liked to.<sup>4</sup>



*The ballot I cast at Kunstbank (which looked exactly like the real ballots used in the election), giving both my votes to the Green Party.*

Another aspect of the "Voting for Foreigners" project was the establishment of a temporary "consulate" of the "Transnational Republic." Founded in 2001 by artists Jakob Zoche and Tammo Rist, the republic promotes transnational citizenship and is a political platform fight-

would be underway in the coming weeks. The *Berliner Zeitung* reported ironically, "The Chancellor has given the Germans a whole new language. The 'loser' of an election is now known as the 'winner' as long as he's a Social Democrat, had expected to do much worse, and is named Schröder." Berlin's *Tagespiegel*, focusing on the

ing for transparency and human rights in global politics.<sup>5</sup> The artists were awarded the prize for the best graduate project in Fine Arts from the President of the University of Fine Arts in Berlin last year. Currently, the Transnational Republic has nearly 3,800 citizens from 80 countries and is growing. After I cast my ballot, I became an "official" citizen and received an ID card (which to my great satisfaction looks almost identical to the government-issue German ID card I've been coveting during my latest struggles to renew my residency permit).

### The Morning After

On the morning after the election, the headlines of major newspapers reflected the inconclusiveness of the results, and the battle for power that



*(Left) A temporary consulate of the Transnational Republic in Kunstbank, an art space in Berlin-Mitte. I applied for citizenship here, transferred money from Euros into the Republic's official currency (called Payola), and received an official identification card. (Above) The newly-minted ID, proclaiming my citizenship in the Transnational Republic, looks almost exactly like a government-issue German identity card.*

<sup>4</sup> People from 21 different countries participated in voting at Kunstbank. The election results were as follows: SPD 40.5 percent, Green Party 38.2 percent, CDU 6.7 percent, Left Party 4.5 percent, FDP 2.2 percent.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.transnationalrepublic.org>



Cover of the tabloid *Bild* shortly after the election, portraying Chancellor Gerhard Schröder as Julius Caesar.

Chancellor's incredible performance of the night before, read simply: *Schröder: Ich regiere weiter* (Schröder: I'll continue to rule). *Die Tageszeitung's* headline proclaimed, "Two Chancellors for Germany," while the *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* front page spelled out the problem, "Merkel wants to become Chancellor, Schröder wants to remain Chancellor." A few days after the election the cover of *Der Stern*, a weekly news magazine, featured a picture of Schröder and Merkel under the headline, *Wir sind Kanzler* (We are Chancellor).

Perhaps the cover story that dared to say what was on everyone's mind came later in the week from the tabloid newspaper *Bild*. Its cover depicted Schröder as Julius Caesar and asked, "Will Schröder make himself the eternal Chancellor?" International response was filled with surprise and concern. The BBC's post-election headline read, somewhat dramatically, "Germany in Chaos." Commentators noted that if Germany could not manage to pull off necessary social and economic reforms, neighboring France would have no chance. And *The New York Times* worried that a weak government in Germany could call the entire European Union project into question and further enfeeble Germany's sluggish economy.

High-powered meetings among party factions are already well underway, and were scheduled to continue until October 18, the deadline for a chancellor to be elected by the Bundestag. Already the intrigue and announcements are shaking up German politics in significant ways. Joschka Fischer, Green Party leader and Foreign Minister in Schröder's government, announced shortly after the election that he is leaving politics and will not participate in the new coalition, whomever it may entail. Although people have long speculated that Fischer is angling for a position in Brussels or even as the next UN Secretary General, the loss of the most prominent left-wing politician from the government is significant.

One factor that remained to be seen was how the voting would go in Dresden, where nearly 220,000 ballots were to be cast on October 2 (the delayed vote is due to the sudden death of a candidate for the ultra-right-wing NPD that occurred shortly before the election). Although those ballots represent only 3 percent of the total cast and the CDU traditionally does well there, the razor-thin lead of the CDU (just under 1 percent) meant that every vote counts, and the results had the potential to influence the muddled and uncertain landscape that became German politics after September 18. □

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