

# One hundred days of Martin Schulz: The rise and fall of a ‘Gottkanzler’?

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Angela Merkel's CDU secured a surprise victory over the SPD in state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia on 14 May. [Julian Göppfarth](#) assesses where the result leaves the SPD's leader, Martin Schulz, ahead of the country's federal elections in September.



**Martin Schulz.** Credits: [Olaf Kosinsky](#) / [Skillshare.eu](#)

It has been not much more than a hundred days that Martin Schulz has been the SPD-candidate for replacing the CDU's Angela Merkel, who is running for a fourth term as Chancellor. And what a hundred days it has been. When Schulz was nominated in January, the SPD struggled to remain above 20 percent in the polls. But his nomination started a fast and furious rise in the polls. Everything seemed possible. Merkel appeared outdated after ten years in power, a face of the past. Visibly marked by the refugee crisis, pressured by an increasingly aggressive Bavarian CSU, the rise of the populist AfD and her party's uneasiness with her "social democratic" policies, the days of Merkel seemed counted. In the media, many talked about a clearly visible *Wechselstimmung* – the German term describing a mood for change.

Schulz, with his EU background, on the other hand, appeared as a "fresh face". New on the political stage of the federal republic, and authentic in the passionate way he defended social justice, he was dubbed by his supporters the "Gottkanzler" (God-Chancellor). Not only the SPD, but the whole country seemed to be mesmerised by his rise and the possible return of a true alternative to Merkel. Not a day passed without Schulz appearing in the news shaking hands and calling for more social justice at some local town hall meeting.

But a hundred days and three state elections later, all this seems like a social democratic dream that slowly, but steadily, has turned into a nightmare. It all started with a state election in the small *Land* of Saarland in late March. In contrast to its rise in the national polls, the SPD did not win support but instead lost votes in the election, while the CDU was able to gain more than 5 percentage points. Here, the party was still able to downplay the loss as the incumbent CDU Minister President, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, was popular and an SPD victory would have been a surprise. Yet, what followed was a period of apparent disillusionment.

The Schulz spell had been broken. His omnipresence in the media abruptly turned into silence. Meanwhile, CDU interior minister Thomas de Maizière published a ten-point paper on “German Leitkultur” (lead-culture), disseminated under the title “We are not Burka”. The effect was to trigger a debate on national identity and reintroduce the CDU as a defender of conservative values. As a belated response, the SPD and Schulz tried to benefit from Macron’s win in the French presidential election by highlighting the affinities between the SPD and Macron’s movement *En Marche*, while calling for a common Eurozone budget. While this might have been appealing for younger generations, to the ears of many older Germans (both SPD and CDU voters) this sounded suspiciously like Eurobonds and “hardworking German taxpayers paying for the excesses of the French state”.

Then, in the shadow of the French presidential elections, the surprise happened. In the Schleswig Holstein state elections on 7 May, the incumbent and relatively popular SPD Minister President Torsten Albig unexpectedly lost more than three percentage points, while the CDU gained more than one. According to [early analyses](#), a number of factors played into the hands of the still largely unknown soon to be Minister President Daniel Günther. The CDU managed to mobilise a high number of previous non-voters as turnout rose, while also attracting disappointed voters who had backed the SPD in the last election.

And just a week later, on 14 May, North Rhine-Westphalia continued the trend. Again a loss. Again a surprise victory for the CDU. After almost seven years of an SPD-Green government under nationally influential Minister President Hannelore Kraft (she was an important part of the decision to nominate Schulz as the SPD’s candidate), the SPD lost eight percentage points while the CDU won almost seven. Much of the [first observations](#) of the voter movements resemble Schleswig Holstein: a rise in the voter turnout and a high mobilisation of non-voters by the CDU. And, especially painful for the SPD in a traditional SPD-led state: the CDU may have gained 310,100 voters from the SPD. Finally, the CDU was able to convince a large number of voters older than 45, an important factor in the face of Germany’s overall ageing population.

While the SPD could still rationalise the losses in the prior two elections by pointing to the more or less symbolic character of their outcomes given the populations of Saarland (less than one million) and Schleswig-Holstein (less than three million), North Rhine-Westphalia represents a different category. With its almost 18 million inhabitants, it is by far the *Land* with the highest population, making it a decisive indicator for national voting trends and thus a possible outcome of the federal election in September.

Moreover, North Rhine-Westphalia, with its past as the German rust belt industrial hub and its still strong working class, has traditionally been SPD governed: During 46 of the past 50 years the state was SPD led. Last but not least, it will be hard to blame the outcome all on Kraft, as many polls have indicated that she is more popular as a person than the surprisingly victorious Armin Laschet – himself known as a fervent supporter of Merkel’s liberal policy stance. Was it thus an open rejection of Schulz? A sign that a simple change of face would not bring back traditional SPD voters? Or is the outcome linked to policies in North Rhine-Westphalia and a focus on the wrong topics in the election campaign, as the federal SPD want us to believe?

The answer to this will be decisive for the outcome of the federal elections and the SPD would do well to find out what happened between the initial state of euphoria around Schulz and last Sunday’s disaster. So far, the party has reacted with two announcements: first, that there will be personal consequences for its leadership. Secondly, that it will make the legalisation of same-sex-marriage one of the core issues of the election campaign.

Whether this will help the SPD to regain momentum remains to be seen. The past months have shown that if the

party wants to have a chance to win against Merkel, the SPD needs to mobilise not only young voters, but also its often older, traditional voter base. More importantly perhaps, the SPD finally needs to be more assertive in shaping the public debate, to be more present in the media and not just rely, as many argue, on a good programme.

With its “Leitkultur” paper, the CDU has shown how important polarising and polemical but profile sharpening media campaigns can be at a time when the mobilisation of non-voters and swing-voters are decisive for the outcome of elections. Similarly, and less noted, the liberals (FDP) under their charismatic and young leader Christian Lindner have managed to be continuously present in the public debate and to rebrand their image after a disastrous period in which the party was kicked out of the *Bundestag*. In the past three state elections they have been able to celebrate remarkable gains that suggest a comeback in German national politics could be in store.

In sum, the main insight of the past 100 days seems to be that, in times of daily changing headlines, a solid media presence and credible party branding might be decisive in the upcoming elections. Those parties that not only rely on shifts in the public debate, but create them, just as the SPD initially did by nominating Schulz, are more likely to see success. If true, this observation might not only explain the rise and fall of the SPD and Schulz, but could also lay out a path for the SPD to come back. After all, as sure as Merkel’s victory seems to look after the three state elections – nobody knows what will happen in the next 100 days.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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