

German federal elections preview: the parties and their campaigns

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With Germany heading to the polls for federal elections tomorrow, [Kai Arzheimer](#) offers a final preview of the vote and outlines the main issues facing Germany's major parties. He writes that as Angela Merkel and the CDU/CSU are comfortably ahead in the polls, the main issue will be whether their current coalition partner, the FDP, can clear the country's five per cent electoral threshold. Even if this fails to happen, however, Angela Merkel is still almost certain to lead the next government, albeit in a grand coalition with the SPD.



In Germany, one of the most uninspiring campaigns in living memory draws to a close. The economy is doing reasonably well, and the governing CDU's campaign is focused solely on Chancellor Merkel and the sense of wellbeing she radiates. Their two-word slogans – “solid finances”, “secure jobs”, “strong economy” – are universally agreeable while bordering on the meaningless. The main opposition party, the SPD, countered this barrage with “the We makes the difference”, which, on second thought, is not so terribly different from the CDU's “successful together”.

From the very beginning, the SPD have been in a difficult position, not least because they could not agree on a challenger to Merkel. After much toing and froing, the party settled on a group of three eligible candidates (a concept that despite previous bad experiences is dubbed rather fondly a “Troika” in SPD circles): Sigmar Gabriel, who is the leader of the party, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is head of the parliamentary party and served as Foreign Minister in the 2005-2009 Grand Coalition government, and Peer Steinbrück, who was Finance Minister during that time.

Neither of the three has a reputation for winning elections. Steinbrück became Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, one of the SPD's traditional strongholds, when his predecessor stepped down in 2002, but lost the 2005 election by a large margin. Similarly, Gabriel took over as Minister President of Lower Saxony in 1999 when his predecessor resigned over allegations of corruption, only to lose spectacularly to the CDU in 2003. Steinmeier was the SPD's candidate for the chancellorship in 2009 and presided over a campaign that resulted in the worst electoral defeat that the party has ever suffered at the national level.

While the SPD maintained that they were lucky to have not one but three potential candidates, Gabriel and Steinmeier silently surrendered their respective claims during the summer of 2012, making the party convention that endorsed Steinbrück a bit of a farce. Both men are about ten years younger than Steinbrück and might hope to get a better shot in four years' time.

The SPD: Between a rock and many hard places

Steinbrück, on the other hand, was always an unlikely candidate. Quick-witted and acerbic, he is a gifted public



Reichstag, Berlin (Credit: Jürgen Matern, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

speaker, but tends to antagonise both political enemies and friends. The media quickly painted him as [gaffe-prone](#) and out of touch with both citizens and ordinary party members. His decision to let himself be photographed striking a rude gesture was just the last in a long series of ill-advised public statements and appearances. While his penchant for straight talking is appealing to some segments of the electorate, about 6 in 10 voters would prefer Merkel over Steinbrück if the Chancellor was elected directly by the people.

But Steinbrück's and the SPD's problems run deeper. The party is still divided over a set of far-reaching welfare reforms known as "Agenda 2010" that were enacted between 2002 and 2005 under the Red-Green government in concert with the CDU. While the "Agenda" has helped Germany to weather the current economic crisis, it was unpopular with many SPD voters and cost the party the chancellorship in 2005. The party also lost control of many Land legislatures during these years. Steinbrück's electoral disaster in North Rhine-Westphalia is a case in point. Moreover, the reforms effectively split the SPD's electorate: today's [Left Party](#), the result of a merger between the former East German socialist PDS and a small but vocal group of SPD dissidents would probably not exist without the Agenda.

Back in the day, Steinbrück was one of the loudest proponents of the Agenda program. Now, he and his party cannot easily backtrack on decisions for which they fought in the past, and which cost them dearly. To further highlight this conundrum, Merkel heaped praise on her predecessor for the Agenda policies during the televised debate between her and Steinbrück. As barbed compliments go, this was a pretty shrewd one.

Steinbrück and the SPD find it similarly difficult to disagree with Merkel in the Eurozone crisis. As Finance Minister, Steinbrück was responsible for bailing out the German banks during the first phase of the crisis, which hardly strengthened his leftist credentials. More recently, the SPD has voted with the government on various deals to "save" the euro, in some cases helping to bring about majorities that otherwise would not have been achieved.

In other policy domains, Merkel has moved so far to the centre that the opposition has accused her of stealing their ideas. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is her (widely popular) U-turn on nuclear energy following the Fukushima disaster, which deprived the Greens of their most important issue.

The polls

Pre-election polls are always noisy, but over the last two months or so, [findings](#) have been largely stable. Merkel's CDU (in alliance with the Bavarian [CSU](#)) are by far the strongest party. On current estimates, they can expect a vote share in the high 30s or very low 40s. Steinbrück's SPD, on the other hand, will probably not poll more than 30 per cent, making a return to a Red-Green coalition extremely unlikely even if the Greens perform well. At the moment, they are more or less on par with the Left at about ten per cent.

In a bid to mobilise their voters, the CDU has recently conjured up the spectre of a Red-Red-Green coalition, or a Left-tolerated Red-Green minority government. Steinbrück has promptly ruled out that he would in any way co-operate with the Left in the strongest possible terms.

The crucial factor in the electoral equation is therefore the FDP's performance. Under German electoral law, a party requires at least five per cent of the valid votes to secure representation in parliament. During the first half of the year, the FDP was nowhere near that number in the polls, but they have recovered some lost ground over the last couple of months and are now polling just about five per cent. Moreover, some CDU supporters will vote tactically for the FDP to bring about their preferred coalition. If the FDP enters parliament, a narrow majority for the current coalition is the most likely outcome. If they fail, a return to Grand Coalition politics is virtually guaranteed. Either way, Angela Merkel would win a third term.

Unknown knowns

Amongst the German elites (and much of the general public), the pro-European consensus is still strong. Therefore, the emergence of the Eurosceptic AFD in early spring [created quite a stir](#), but interest in the new party [quickly](#)

slumped because they never polled more than four per cent.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the party has recently floated the idea that pollsters dramatically underestimate their likely performance, and the mainstream media are showing some interest in this hypothesis. To cap this off, party leader Bernd Lucke has somewhat brazenly offered to enter coalition talks with the CDU, forcing Merkel to rule out any co-operation with the AFD. If the AFD would indeed enter parliament (which seems unlikely by conventional standards), that would also force a return to Grand Coalition government. Either way, it seems almost inevitable that Merkel will stay at the helm for another four years.

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