

## Blonde or brunette: Germany's next Chancellor

At 9 a.m. PST Sunday morning, the doors to the polling stations in Germany crank shut in what the polls are showing to be the closest national election of German post-war history. As one German television commentator put it two weeks ago, the only thing for certain is that the next "first lady" will be a blonde. This comment about the hair color of the wives of both candidates, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and challenger Edmund Stoiber, however, demonstrates another safe bet – the Americanization of German elections. The attention paid this past month to the wives of Chancellor candidates is somewhat new and would appear to be borrowed from across the Atlantic.

Another American export this election was two televised Sunday night debates, a first in German history. Commentators have debated the debates' significance more hotly than the candidates debated the issues. Whether the debates abated complaints about candidate "Schroiber," i.e., that there isn't a real choice, is hard to say. If nothing else, the debates may tend to shift emphasis away from the parties and their platforms toward the personal qualities of the candidates.

It's the nature of our "winner-take-all" presidential system that votes for losing candidates go down the tubes. It wasn't always this way, for the Founders originally gave the position of Vice-President to the person who came in second, which quickly proved unworkable. In a parliamentary system, even losing votes count. In Germany a party that receives 5% of the vote becomes seated in the Bundestag. Today there are five parties in contention for seats: The Social Democrats (SPD), the Christian Democrats with their junior Bavarian partner Christian Socialists (CDU/CSU), the Free Democrats (FDP), the Green party, and the Party of German Socialists (PDS). The person who would be Chancellor must unite a majority of the Bundestag. At the time of this writing, the SPD and the CDU/CSU were close to being tied at about 38% each, so no one will rule without at least one "junior partner." Germany is ruled today by a coalition of Social Democrats and Greens.

A conceivable outcome this morning is a coalition of the SPD, the Greens, and the FDP, but it would require a lot of horse trading over policy and cabinet posts, some of which has already begun. For a while, it looked like the country might be forced into a "Grand Coalition," a union of the two largest parties, of the SPD with the CDU/CSU. Post-war Germany's history with its one grand coalition, led by former Nazi party member Kurt Georg Kiesinger in the '60s, is not encouraging. With no significant opposition in Parliament, the opposition took to the streets.

Germans cast two votes. The "Erststimme," or first votes, are cast for parliamentary candidates. It is the second vote, however, that determines the election. These "Zweitstimme" are cast for the party and determine the party's seats in Parliament. A party that receives 38% of the vote will get 38% of the Bundestag, distributed according to the party's ranked list of candidates. The Bundestag then elects the Chancellor. Occasionally so many of a party's candidates will win with first votes that the party seats more members than the party's second-vote percentage would otherwise allow. These "Überhangsmandate" take their seats anyway, increasing the overall size of the Bundestag. In the last election the SPD seated 13 such Überhangsmandate.

These complications add no small degree of intrigue. The FDP, for example, traditionally receives more second votes than first votes. A voter may decide to vote for a candidate of the SPD,

but cast the second vote for the FDP. This particular SPD-FDP split causes the FDP to seat more candidates while allowing the SPD to make up for it with a few Überhangsmandate. The most frequent reason for splitting is to help a party get over the 5% barrier. A party that doesn't get at least 5% is out in the cold unless at least three of its candidates win outright ("Direkt Mandaten") with first votes, which is not a sure thing for the PDS right now.

As of this writing (9.23.02), the polls show the PDS under 5%. Schröder has declared that his SPD will not join with the PDS under any circumstance (although it has formed state governments with the PDS in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). Schröder may not need the PDS directly, but he may need the PDS to take 5% of the seats to make the numbers turn out for him.

Although the election appears close, the country's preference for the job of Chancellor is not. The country's leading news magazine, Der Spiegel, regularly conducts a poll asking a simple question about leading political personalities: Would you like to see this person "play an important role" in the future? Lately Schröder has been tied for second place in these weekly polls, while Stoiber comes in around eighth. Consistently topping these polls as Germany's favorite politician is Joschka Fischer, the champion of the Green party. Although Fischer has a 78% approval rating, his party expects to take only about 7% of the vote. Fischer campaigns on the platform that, if you want to see him continue as Vice-Chancellor/Foreign Minister, you'll have to vote for the Greens.

Schröder comes across as a statesman, smooth, knowledgeable, artful and articulate with a steady sonorous voice. Stoiber's speech is often shrill, high pitched, and interrupted with frequent uhs and ahs. In the first debate Stoiber attacked Schröder for being anti-American with his declaration that Germany will not participate in a war with Iraq; and in the second debate for failing to reduce Germany's high unemployment. Stoiber asks his countrymen, ala Ronald Reagan, whether they are better off than they were four years ago. Schröder's position on Iraq has been popular in Germany, although criticized for placing the election over international obligations. Schröder has been able to deflect the unemployment criticism somewhat by suggesting that the collapse of the international economy was not his fault.

The SPD is the party of unions, of the social net and of liberal social values. The CDU/CSU is the party of supply-side economics and conservative social values. The Free Democrats want to lower taxes, privatize public services, and give business a freer hand. One of its luminaries, Jürgen Möllemann, is embroiled in a feud with Germany's Jewish leaders over alleged antisemitic comments and policies. The Greens want to protect the environment and minorities. A primary goal is to move the country out of atomic energy into alternative sources. The PDS grew out of the ashes of former communist East Germany. Gregor Gysi, the leading figure of the PDS, described his party recently as "left of the German social democracy."

In the turbulent '60s, Schröder was a loyal "Juso," or young socialist, with the SPD. Stoiber had a bumper sticker on his car that said "Mir stinken die Linken" (the left stinks). Joschka Fischer lived in a radical commune and, along with his good friend Daniel Cohn-Bendit, better known then as "Danny the Red," was a stone-throwing prominent leader of the "extra-parliamentary opposition." In January of 2001, the daughter of Ulrike Meinhof of the notorious and murderous "Red Army Fraktion" (RAF), or "Baader-Meinhof" gang, released photos of Fischer in full demo gear – helmet,

face guard, body padding – beating a policeman named Marx with a baseball bat during a leftist demonstration in Frankfurt in 1973. In 1976 someone from Fischer’s “Putzgruppe” threw a molotov cocktail that burned another policeman over 60% of his body. Fischer says he only threw rocks.

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has the highest approval rating of any politician in a country with a history of respecting uniforms. The criminal defense attorney who represented the RAF in the ‘70s, Otto Schily, is now Schröder’s popular law-and-order minister of internal affairs.

Although both major parties strive to appeal to the middle class, the parliamentary system allows a wide range of voices and issues. In a parliamentary system, Ross Perot would have been a kingmaker in 1992 with his 20% and could have picked his cabinet post. Instead, he received zero votes in our electoral college and faded into obscurity. The presence of the Greens in the ruling coalition these last four years has had an enormous influence on the country’s ecological policies.

The Social Democrats are red, the CDU/CSU black, the Greens Green, the FDP yellow, the PDS red, and right-wing splinter parties are, of course, brown. A coalition of red SPD, yellow FDP, and green Greens is referred to as an “Ampel” or stop-light coalition.

Stoiber’s only viable coalition partner is the FDP, which is not declaring which way it would go and has a history of switching between the SPD and the CDU/CSU. Schröder, on the other hand, has the Greens positively on his side. If, as is likely, the CDU/CSU and Greens cannot form a majority, an “Ampel” coalition may be able to pull it off. Schröder has ruled out red-red-green, but the numbers at this moment make that unlikely, anyway. The only other choice would be a grand coalition, which few want and no one campaigns for, but can occasionally be forced by the numbers.

Stoiber devoted half of his final campaign speech Friday to thanking Americans for helping them solve their problems yesterday and blaming foreign immigration for many of Germany’s problems today. In their own final addresses, Schröder and Fischer emphasized Germany’s obligations to the less advantaged, domestic and foreign, and the struggle to keep Germany and Europe from falling to an emergent anti-foreigner populism. Schröder’s loudest applause came when he said that the Middle East needs more peace, not more war, and that friendship (to America) means the ability to express one’s own views freely. His final words repeated a recent campaign slogan, asking voters to elect “Doris, her husband, his party.”

Three mini-scandals in the final week attest to the torrid nature of the election of 2002, while evoking memories of Germany’s past. Helmut Kohl of the CDU called Wolfgang Thierse of the SPD the worst president of the Bundestag since Hermann Göring. Jürgen Möllemann of the FDP attacked Israel and its Jewish supporters in a last-minute brochure; and two days before the election, Germany’s Justice Minister, Herta Däubler-Gmelin allegedly said that George Bush’s talk of war in Iraq is an attempt to draw attention from domestic problems, a popular strategy, she said, that Hitler also used. In an election this close, these sorts of things could threaten to be decisive, but with practically everyone involved, they’re cancelling each other out.

The German Constitution requires elections to be held on a Sunday or holiday. Over 85% of Germans exercise their right and duty to vote.

To some the only question this morning is whether the next German Chancellor will be blonde or brunette. Like his wife and Schröder's 4th wife, Doris, Stoiber is blonde. Schröder has been accused of dying his hair to cover the gray, but adamantly denies it. Experts in this area have opined that 58-year-old Schröder must be dying his hair and polls show that few people believe his denials. If enough voters trust him on everything else, Schröder will lead Germany for another four years.