

# Analysis of the German election results 2005

by Richard Corbett MEP

**Before last weekend, it was hard to find a political commentator who was predicting anything other than runaway success for Angela Merkel, the challenger to Germany's outgoing Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, in last Sunday's general election.**

But German voters, in their wisdom, have delivered a quite different and much more interesting result. Far from Schröder's Social Democrats being buried beneath the Conservatives's victorious landslide, the former have in fact managed to regain ground steadily—to the point that they have now come within about three seats of Merkel's party.

And it might yet be even tighter. The poll in one seat, Dresden, has been postponed due to the death of a candidate, just as happened to us in South Staffordshire earlier this year. But the Dresden seat is likely to be won by the Social Democrats, with a corresponding effect on the party's share of top-up proportional seats. In other words, it's a virtual dead-heat!

German governments are usually made up of coalitions of two or more parties, so every German election is followed by a period of negotiation to hammer out an agreement and build a majority. But this time is different. Even if the Conservatives teamed up with the Liberals or the Social Democrats teamed up again with the Greens, neither side would be able to achieve a majority. The balance of power is being held by a small and fairly new group known simply as 'the Left party', made up largely of the former East German Communists—a group that nobody wants to strike a deal with.

In fact, at the moment, everyone seems to be concentrating on ruling out various options. Schröder has quite rightly ruled out a 'grand coalition' of red and blue: this kind of coalition of opposites is bound to run into trouble, and if people later want to vote against the government, they have only extremist parties to vote for. Meanwhile, the Liberals have ruled out a Socialist-Green-Liberal coalition, and neither the Liberals nor the Greens are very keen on a Conservative-Liberal-Green coalition. (Perhaps they've observed what has happened to Leeds City Council?)

So now what? The new Federal Chancellor, Germany's equivalent to our Prime Minister, must be elected by a majority of more than half the members of the Bundestag, equivalent to our House of Commons. At the moment, nobody has such a majority, so everything depends on the inter-party negotiations to take place over the next few weeks.

If no result is forthcoming after 14 days, the Bunderstag elects whoever gets the most votes—even if it's not an absolute majority. The Federal President can accept this candidate, or call fresh elections. (This has never actually happened in post-war Germany, which is why very few non-experts are aware that the option actually exists.)

So nobody can be very sure what will happen next. If the Conservatives and Liberals form an alliance, they might be able to get Frau Merkel elected, but this would leave them with a minority government which would have to strike a bargain with some opposition party or other each time it wanted to pass legislation.

On the other hand, a coalition of Social Democrats and Greens would have to gather the support of other parties to get Schröder elected Chancellor. But that might be possible. The Left Party might agree to vote for Schröder in order to block the more right-wing Merkel from coming to power, even if they refused then to join Schröder's government. This government, too, would have to bargain to get legislation through the Bundestag—but it would have more bargaining options.

If there are any readers who fancy a flutter, I'll stick my neck out and guess that the smart money is probably on Schröder. He now sees that his economic reforms, which started off very unpopular among traditional Social Democrat voters, are finally beginning to bear fruit. Germany has just become the world's largest exporter and unemployment is at last beginning to fall. That's why voters returned to him in unexpectedly high numbers.

Schröder also sees that he occupies the middle ground between the Conservative-Liberal alliance—who wanted faster, harsher reform—and the Left Party, who wanted no reform at all. And neither of these two alternatives has managed to win a majority in the election. Politically, he feels vindicated.

Germany's constitution now allows Schröder a way to get back into power as a minority Chancellor if all goes well. Or, if the Federal President prefers to call a new election, Schröder is equally well placed to build on the momentum of his comeback and win a better majority second time around. We must watch his progress with interest!

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