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The Meritocrat

From carpenter's son to the presidency: how Frank-Walter Steinmeier became the poster boy for social mobility

On Sunday 12th February, Germany elected its new president, and after examining the role of this office in the Federal Republic of Germany, ahead of this weekend's official inauguration, we will, in this article, turn our attention to the man elected to succeed Joachim Gauck: Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Born in 1956 in what was then West Germany and a member of the Social Democrats (SPD) since his late teens, Steinmeier became a household name during Gerhard Schröder's ground-breaking coalition government with the Greens around the turn of the Millennium, and has remained an SPD heavyweight ever since, leading the party through the late 2000s and serving as Foreign Minister in both its coalitions with the conservative CDU.

It is hard to think of a more fittingly social-democratic biography than Steinmeier's: son of a Westphalian carpenter and a factory worker displaced from formerly German territories at the close of the Second World War, his childhood in the rural Lippe region was anything other than privileged. Steinmeier shone at school, however, and went on to study law at the University of Gießen, acquiring a doctorate on state intervention in the prevention of homelessness in 1991. While in government in the 1960s and 1970s, the SPD had focussed strongly on broadening access to higher education beyond the traditional elites, and Steinmeier's progression from a blue-collar background into academia is precisely the kind of outcome the party intended to encourage. This doubtless goes some way to explaining Steinmeier's unwavering commitment both to his party and to the broader idea of social mobility; meanwhile, the value of his own hard graft despite a non-academic family background in many ways prefigures his meritocratic policy priorities in the Agenda 2010 benefits reforms, based as they were on offering help primarily to those who showed a willingness to help themselves.

The rise and rise of Steinmeier

Indeed, Steinmeier is emblematic of the SPD inasmuch as he was instrumental in its return to national government after the wilderness years of the 1980s and 1990s. Having left academia following his doctorate for a position as a policy adviser in the Lower Saxony chancellery, Steinmeier's political potential was recognised by the state's then-premier, Gerhard Schröder, who made him his head of office and drew him into his circle of advisers. Much in line with the "Third Way" thinking prevalent across European social democratic parties in the 1990s, Schröder's highly successful revamp of the SPD drew the party towards the political centre ground, promising unideologically "not to do everything differently, but to do lots of things better".

This pragmatic approach bore Steinmeier's signature, too, and, leading the SPD into coalition with the Greens following the national elections in 1998, Schröder took Steinmeier with him into federal government. From 1999 until election defeat in 2005, Steinmeier headed the Schröder chancellery as chief of staff, helping to devise and administer the comprehensive package of reforms which became known as the Agenda 2010.

King of the compromise

Due to this high-profile role in the most controversial changes to the German socio-economic model since the founding of the Federal Republic, Steinmeier's path is once again emblematic of the SPD: while several of the party's leaders and many of its supporters broke with it on what they saw as a betrayal of its core values and voters, Steinmeier stayed the course, convinced of the necessity of the austerity measures. In the fissure that went through the German left in the mid-2000s, Steinmeier and the SPD stayed firmly on the centrist side, a stance that enabled them to govern with the conservative CDU in Grand Coalitions between 2005 and 2009 (during which Steinmeier was Merkel's Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor) and again from 2013 (with Steinmeier once again as Foreign Minister), yet limited their electoral prospects to a maximum of 25% of the vote.

The splitting of the left-of-centre spectrum, as many of the old SPD faithful went to hard-left Die Linke, was the core reason behind Steinmeier's greatest political failure to date: his defeat against Merkel in the 2009 elections. In retrospect, it is not hard to see why he was doomed to fail. Having been in government continuously since 1998 and having served as Merkel's deputy up until polling day, there was no credible way in which Steinmeier could lead a convincing attack on the status quo –

especially since Germany had seen strong economic growth following the Agenda 2010 reforms for which he stood, and survived the Financial Crisis more or less unscathed. For better or for worse, Steinmeier and the SPD under his leadership were tied to the centre ground and could not articulate the anger of those left behind by their own reforms.

Making common cause

Indeed, after sealing his fate in 2009, it is precisely this position as a pragmatic centrist that allowed Steinmeier to stay relevant despite defeat, leading the SPD through four years of opposition and back into government with the CDU in 2013, where it has placed its stamp on policy quite indelibly despite its junior position. His aloofness from the sometimes hazardous undercurrents of hard-left foreign policy have also, while making him unpopular with some core SPD voters, given him creditability as Foreign Minister – a role in which his notable successes of late include working with France to freeze the Ukraine conflict.

As such, it is unsurprising that Steinmeier was a popular candidate across most of the political parties represented in the Federal Convention which elects the president. He will now, after all, have to be a neutral, unifying voice, not a party-politician. Combined with his methodical, considered manner of speaking and unpretentious personal style, it is his track record of policy implementation across partisan divides that has garnered him the label "anti-Trump". While the world may be on tenterhooks trying to work out what the White House will do next, there is no small comfort in knowing roughly what to expect of the inhabitant of Berlin's Bellevue.



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