Berlin's benevolent populist

The biggest winner in the upcoming German elections may be democracy itself

A few weeks ago, the outcome of Germany's elections in September seemed all but predictable. Chancellor Angela Merkel was widely expected to be re-elected for a fourth term – adding her name to the list of longest serving chancellors headed by Otto von Bismarck, Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl. Today, however, this outcome seems anything but guaranteed. As the country's centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) experience an unprecedented increase in support, they have for the first time in years pulled ahead of Merkel's Christian Democrats. With this exceptional change in Germany's political landscape, even a left-wing coalition composed of Social Democrats, the Greens and the socialist Die Linke is now conceivable.

Germany's tectonic shift has a name: Martin Schulz. Last Sunday, the former president of the European Parliament was officially nominated as candidate for chancellor and elected leader of the SPD. Schulz gained a full 100 per cent of the vote in a party convention held in Berlin – an unprecedented result in Germany's post-war history.

In a continent where scores of centre-left parties have hit an iceberg – most recently in elections in the Netherlands – the sudden return of Germany's social democrats offers a glimmer of hope to centre-left parties elsewhere. The underlying causes, however, are due more to strategy than to miracles.

Outside in

At the root of Schulz's rise is his ability to address his core supporters. Unlike his predecessor as party leader, now foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, Schulz has largely kept out of the wheeling and dealing of party politics in Germany. His only elected office in the country was 30 years ago, as Mayor of Würselen, a small town on the Dutch border. As president of the European Parliament in Brussels, Schulz formed a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats. However, for voters on the centre-left in Germany he represents a welcome break from years of

centrist policies in Berlin's own grand coalition. As the junior coalition partner in the German Bundestag, the SPD were punished by voters in a series of electoral defeats.

Crucially, Schulz has used his status as a political outsider to shake up Berlin with his own brand of centre-left populism. At the core lies a focus on "hard working people playing by the rules" and renewed prominence given to social justice. Schulz has promised to modify a set of social-reforms implemented by the last social democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. While Schröder's pro-market Agenda 2010 had largely positive macroeconomic effects in Germany, it was hugely unpopular with the electorate. Traditional centre-left voters turned their backs on the SPD and flocked to far-left alternatives. Schulz is now attempting to heal this historical wound – and so far it seems to be working.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, Schulz has managed to present his candidature as an antidote to the global rise of authoritarianism. Presenting himself as the quintessential anti-Trump, Schulz has tapped into widespread German uneasiness with the new US administration and is countering Trump's "America first" agenda with the promise to "make Europe great again". As Schulz currently holds no political office outside his party – and carefully keeps his distance from the ruling coalition in Berlin – he enjoys much greater freedom than Merkel, who is constrained by the responsibilities of political office.

Conservatives strike back

Merkel's biggest challenge, however, is a lack of enthusiasm amongst her own support base. After 11 years in government, the rift between her CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the CSU, over Merkel's principled stance on refugees continues to divide the conservative camp. Merkel's progressive views on migration, nuclear power, citizenship laws and identity politics also rile traditional conservatives. While many of the chancellor's positions have enjoyed broad public support in Germany, they have been much less popular in her own party.

In many ways, Merkel's current dilemma is reminiscent of the crisis experienced by social democrats in the wake of Gerhard Schröder's agenda reforms a decade ago. Both leaders, Merkel and Schröder, successfully pushed for change but struggled to bring their party on board. The same frustration that traditional social democrats felt over the agenda reforms now translates into lukewarm support of conservative voters for a party leader they see as conservative in name only. In an era in which the mobilisation of core constituencies has proven to be decisive for successful political campaigns, this is a significant challenge for

Merkel.

Of course, the race for the German chancellorship is anything but over. In fact, Merkel's contenders have regularly underestimated her political talent only to be side-lined and defeated. The electoral victory on Sunday 27th March of Merkel's Christian Democrats in the rural state of Saarland comes as a stark reminder of the challenges ahead. But while the popular CDU candidate Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer won a further term, the social democrats scored only a few points below their current national rating - no small feat in a traditionally conservative catholic region.

Regardless of who becomes chancellor, the biggest loser of the current Merkel-Schulz run-off has already emerged: Germany's right-wing populists. While the radical right continues to prevail across the continent, public support for Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* has collapsed to just 9 percent - their lowest rating in a year. With the AfD looking more insignificant by the day, perhaps the biggest winner of Germany's elections is democracy itself.



Michael Bröning
New York CIty

Michael Bröning heads the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in New York.