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The unlikely victory: lessons of the SPD's election win

How does one provide security in an unstable world? The victorious social democrats have convinced German voters that they have the answer

Who would have dared predict this a few months or years ago: the SPD becoming the strongest party in the *Bundestag* elections? With just over 26 per cent of the votes, the social democrats were not only 1.6 points ahead of the Christian democrats. Compared with the polls of previous years, the outcome was a small democratic miracle: until early summer, the SPD was polling at a depressing 15 per cent.

How did this astonishing victory come about? What lessons can progressive and left-wing parties elsewhere learn from it? And what follows now?

The simple promise of respect

First, of course, the social democrats won because the others lost. They ran a perfect election campaign; their rivals did not.

It would be too simplistic, though, to reduce the election victory to slick professionalism. After all, what does 'social democracy' mean to a large part of the electorate? They associate it with parties, political movements and an idea that is there for the regular guys and the working classes, a political force that ensures that things are fair and at the same time stands for progressive, socially-liberal modernisation.

If social democrats are more credible again in this respect — frankly, if they are regaining a little of the credibility they have lost — then they can be successful.

Olaf Scholz, the SPD's candidate for chancellor, has moved moderately but notably to the left in recent years. As finance minister, the pandemic gave him the chance to establish a new Keynesian narrative. Fiscal

conservatism, which had long dominated German discourse, had become obsolete. The 'investing state' was in demand, a state that stabilises the economy but also ensures that things are more just. Globally, but also in Germany, a new economic paradigm was emerging.

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Scholz and the election campaign made this new paradigm the central message. This included the demand for a higher minimum wage but just as much the demand for order in the labour markets, so that the most vulnerable and precarious parts of the working classes would finally be better protected once more. This was summed up in a central campaign term, 'respect' — respect for the people who today are treated disrespectfully, because they are poorly paid, because they are bossed around and because they don't get the recognition they deserve.

Campaign slogans can be empty phrases but sometimes they get to the heart of what is at stake and help paint a congruent picture. Broad sections of the population, entire social milieux, see themselves disrespected and unrepresented, with the feeling that no one is actually interested in them — and that the social democrats also forget about them. It was to these groups that the campaign was directed, with the message 'we are on your side'. It is not possible completely to win back lost trust within a short period, but a few steps forward have clearly been made.

Solid and sound

Secondly, there was the candidate. Scholz entered the election as vice-chancellor as well as finance minister, while the chancellor, Angela Merkel, was no longer running. This gave the social democrats the opportunity to present the SPD candidate as separated from the crowd by his experience and ability to run a government. The campaign was fully tailored to the *Spitzenkandidat*, a seasoned politician. He was simply positioned as a reliable craftsperson of government business, solid and sound.

This made him the perfect candidate for the current circumstances. In a world increasingly perceived as threatening, in a time marked by Covid-19 and the associated economic risks, and in the face of a looming climate catastrophe, the need for security was a central electoral theme. When there is a lot of security and an optimistic spirit, voters are willing to dare the new — then one can win with messages of modernisation and

radical reform. In a crisis, the need for security prevails.

This brings a paradox that will probably be with us all for some time to come: the more radical change is called for, the greater the need for citizens to feel secure.

Fortunate unity

The third major reason for the social-democrat victory was a coincidence. After the resignation of the former SPD leader, Andrea Nahles, the left wing won the contest for the party chair. With Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans sharing the role, not only did pronounced leftists take the reins of the party — they are also anti-establishment figures.

These representatives of the party's left then made Scholz, a figure of the centre, their candidate for chancellor. This resulted in a constellation which is rather rare: all groups in the party pulled together behind a common project and worked to bring about its success.

Anyone familiar with party politics knows that more often one strand has the lead candidacy while the other moans and offers only half-hearted support — if it doesn't actively push back. The SPD had seldom experienced such unity before — even the usual vanities and egotisms played virtually no role.

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In short, there was a central message clearly oriented towards the social-democratic values of justice, a candidate who appealed to the public's great need for security and a party which fought in unison for victory, eschewing the 'narcissism of minor differences' not uncommon in left-wing circles.

But the election results also show that, despite all the diagnoses of a 'crisis of social democracy', a 'demand' for it comes into play when the 'supply' is reasonably good. Some commentators, such as Mark Schieritz in *Die Zeit*, are therefore already talking about a 'social-democratic decade'.

An attractive left

This is perhaps a bit premature but, if one looks further afield, the postulate is supported. Social democrats have recently won elections in many countries in Europe — they govern throughout Scandinavia and the Iberian peninsula — and Joe Biden in the White House has a lot in

common with Scholz.

Biden too is from the centre of his party, yet he has come to terms with a strengthened left, is more left-wing as president than ever as a senator and today scores points with the classic social-democratic messages — 'it's time to grow the economy from the bottom and the middle out' — because 'trickle down' amid unleashed markets simply did not work. People want social security and decent wages and they don't want to be treated like numbers.

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For sure, unlike in earlier eras, social democrats don't have a planetary *zeitgeist* behind them. Societies are polarised and fragmented, hard-line conservatives or populists rule in important countries and, moreover, the electoral victories of social democrats are usually very close — often, 25-27 per cent already makes one the strongest party, at least under the conditions of proportional representation. There are exceptions, such as the socialists of the impressive Portuguese prime minister, António Costa.

The election victory of the German social democrats was also very close. In view of the narrow lead, government negotiations will be complicated. The most likely scenario is that the SPD will be able to form a coalition with the Greens and the liberal-conservative Free Democratic Party, but that is not certain at the moment.

Such a coalition could easily reach a consensual government programme on some issues. But on questions of economic, social, and fiscal policy, the social democrats and Greens on the one hand and the FDP on the other are worlds apart.

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Robert Misik
Vienna

Robert Misik is a writer and essayist. He publishes in many German-language newspapers and magazines, including *Die Zeit* and *Die Tageszeitung*.