

The Schulz effect – the German Social Democrats are gaining popularity

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Three polls conducted since Martin Schulz was chosen as the SPD's candidate for chancellor suggest that this choice has significantly boosted support for this party. In one of the polls (INSA), support for the Social Democrats was even 1 percentage point higher than for the Christian Democrats. In turn, according to the poll conducted by DeutschlandTrend at the beginning of every month, commissioned by ARD television, if the chancellor were elected in a direct election, Schulz would clearly beat Angela Merkel, garnering 50% of the votes (Merkel – 34%). Half of the respondents also want the Social Democrats to lead a future government (CDU/CSU – 39%). However, in the case of the question concerning government coalitions, most respondents would still choose the CDU/CSU-SPD grand coalition (43%). The CDU/CSU-Green Party coalition was the second most popular option, with a 36% support. 33% backed the SPD-Green Party-Left Party coalition, 31% the SPD-Green Party-FDP coalition and 28% the CDU/CSU-Green Party-FDP coalition.

Commentary

- There are a few causes of the 'Schulz effect' which the SPD is benefitting from. Martin Schulz is a recognisable politician and at the same time a new face in domestic politics. He is not personally associated with any unpopular decisions taken by the SPD. He also symbolises a change in the party, which was long awaited by the voters, and which will result in the removal from power of those politicians who co-created Agenda 2010, the painful welfare system and labour market reform (carried out in 2003–2005 under the SPD-Green Party government coalition).
- It is clear from what Schulz has said so far that he has drawn conclusions from the Brexit referendum, the outcome of the election in the USA and the popularity of Alternative for Germany (AfD) in his own country. Schulz, who until recently served as the president of the European Parliament, wants to be viewed as the voice of the 'excluded' and an anti-establishment candidate. In contrast to the AfD, he is building his narrative not on the Germany-others opposition but on the privileged-excluded narrative, and also on anti-Trumpism. According to the DeutschlandTrend poll, only 22% of Germans view the USA under Donald Trump's rule as a reliable partner (a decrease from the level of 37% before the presidential election). Furthermore, 67% of respondents fear that the new US president's policy will weaken the German economy.

- The Christian Democrats have limited room for manoeuvre as regards the possibilities of stopping the increase in support for the SPD and must hope that the trend caused by the freshness effect will not last long. Their strongest asset is the incumbent chancellor (the Bavarian CSU also announced on 6 February that it supports Merkel as their candidate for chancellor). However, the polls show that Germans would like to have a different chancellor after twelve years of her rule. If the trend revealed by the polls continues, this will mean that the SPD has successfully overcome its most serious problem which has prevented this party from winning elections over the past few years—the lack of a distinctive leader who would be viewed as a real alternative to Angela Merkel. This means we should expect a fierce electoral struggle between the two parties.