

Germany: Scholz's growing chances

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For several weeks, Olaf Scholz – the Social Democratic Party (SPD)'s candidate for chancellor – has continued to rise in popularity. If direct elections to this post were held, the current finance minister and vice-chancellor would currently be supported by 49% of respondents, which is up 5% compared to two weeks ago (the Politbarometer poll of 27 August). His CDU/CSU competitor Armin Laschet would be chosen by 17% of respondents (down 4%), and the Green candidate Annalena Baerbock by 16% (unchanged).

Scholz's good ratings are starting to translate into support for the Social Democrats. In the Forsa/RTL/n-tv survey of 24 August, his party overtook the CDU/CSU Union for the first time since 2006. In a poll from 31 August, the SPD has the support of 23% of respondents (no change compared to the previous week's survey), the CDU/CSU 21% (-1 pp), the Greens 18% (unchanged), the FDP 12% (unchanged), the AfD 11% (+1 pp), and the Left 6% (unchanged).

Commentary

- The SPD may yet increase its lead over the CDU. The Social Democrats are perceived as the party with the lowest potential for negative voters (29% of respondents are sure that they will not vote for them, compared to 37% for the CDU). At the same time, 29% of respondents indicate that they could imagine voting for the SPD (YouGov poll, 20–24 August). If the SPD were to win the Bundestag elections, its position in the coalition negotiations would be strengthened due to likely victories in elections to the state parliaments in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Berlin, which will be held in parallel with the parliamentary elections on 26 September.
- The Social Democrats have run a coherent campaign, focusing only on the person of the main candidate, thanks to which the party's high-profile disputes over the manifesto and personnel in previous years have been silenced. The SPD has focused primarily on social issues and climate protection in conjunction with preserving jobs in industry. One of the party's most important messages is about ensuring stability and avoiding drastic changes/reforms (including in climate policy) which might bring additional burdens for citizens. This is in line with the mood of most Germans: 70% of those polled are satisfied with their economic situation (the Politbarometer poll of 27 August).
- The leaders of the SPD, Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans, as well as the vice-chairman Kevin Kühnert, who are identified with the left-wing faction of the group, remain in the campaign's shadow. This has allowed Scholz to send a moderate message (using non-confrontational language) primarily targeted at centrist voters. The party sees this as an opportunity to attract a part of the current electorate of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who

are looking for a successor to her on the political scene. This is particularly important in the context of the large number of undecided voters (23%, Politbarometer of 27 August). Another important factor is the declaration by 23% of current CDU supporters that they would choose another party after the Chancellor ruled out running for another term of office (Forsa survey from February 2020). The SPD candidate has strengthened his position by imitating Merkel (for example by repeating her campaign slogan '*Sie kennen mich*' – 'You know me', by conducting debates in a similar way, and using some of her characteristic gestures). In addition, Scholz has skilfully used his position as vice-chancellor and minister of finance to manage crises within the scope of his competences, including by offering aid to entrepreneurs during the pandemic and after the nationwide flooding in July this year.

- Scholz is also faring well compared to the competition: the CDU and Green candidates have made numerous mistakes. Laschet is burdened with image mishaps, especially in connection with the catastrophic consequences of the flood, for example, in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia which he controls. He has also been harmed by internal-party criticism – by the Bavarian prime minister and CSU chairman Markus Söder, among others – concerning how the Christian Democrats have run their election campaign. In turn, the fall in support for the Greens, including the party's candidate for chancellor, is due to media allegations of plagiarism concerning excerpts from a book Baerbock published in June, among other issues. This has been overlapped by previous uncertainties regarding her financial declarations, as well as inconsistencies regarding her studies. There are no similar charges against the SPD challenger. It is true that the revelations of manipulation and accounting fraud that led to the insolvency of the financial service provider Wirecard, with many small investors losing their savings, have led to criticism of the head of the finance ministry over allegations that the company was not properly supervised. Nevertheless, this has not yet affected overall opinions of Scholz as candidate for chancellor.
- In his domestic policy Scholz has used social slogans, primarily a promise to raise the minimum wage from the current level of €9.60 to €12 per hour. He attaches great importance to maintaining pensions at a level similar to the current one in the future, introducing new supplements for families with children, and building 400,000 new apartments per year (including 100,000 as social housing). To finance these plans, the SPD intends to raise taxes on the richest and take out new loans. Regarding the *Energiewende*, he has emphasised issues of fair distribution of burdens and the implementation of social protection, while maintaining Germany's status as an industrial nation. The SPD also shares the conviction that the capacity installed in renewable energy sources must be significantly and more rapidly expanded, and has announced the full decarbonisation of this branch of the economy by 2040. The party is also trying to distinguish itself from the Green politicians: for example, they oppose restrictions on domestic flights. In migration policy, Scholz is considered a conservative, striving to limit the influx of illegal migrants to Germany. He has called for help to be offered to refugees among the countries of their region of origin. He also favours strengthening internal security institutions (including the police), often in opposition to members of his own party.

- In the debate on foreign policy, Scholz has emphasised the importance of trans-Atlantic cooperation and working together within NATO (as well as increasing spending on the Bundeswehr, but without referring to the 2% GDP postulate), as well as the need to strengthen 'European sovereignty' (by means including joint purchases of military equipment). In its manifesto, the SPD advocates deepening European (especially economic and social) integration. It also emphasises strengthening the EU's common foreign policy by extending the possibility of majority voting on such matters. The Social Democrats favour keeping the door open for the Western Balkan countries to join the Union. In relations with the United States, Scholz has called for close cooperation, especially in the area of climate, trade and security policy. He has not announced any significant changes regarding relations with Russia, declaring that dialogue will be maintained. He supports the actions Germany has taken to date regarding Nord Stream 2.
- A Polish policy is not one of Scholz's campaign priorities. The Social Democrats support the expansion of instruments to "strengthen the rule of law in the EU", and in this context the SPD candidate has criticised the government of Poland. In an interview with the *Rheinische Post* in December 2020, he made a distinction "between the Europe-friendly majority of Polish society and the Polish government with which, as the German state, we are now also critically discussing the rule of law in Europe".
- If the SPD wins, Scholz will strive to form a coalition with the Greens, with whose manifesto it has the most in common. In possible negotiations regarding the future government, the biggest problems will arise in certain aspects of climate policy, as well as foreign and security issues (such as the approach to Russia). However, if the election results do not allow the formation of a two-party coalition, Scholz will seek an agreement with the Greens and the FDP. His relationship with the latter's leader, Christian Lindner, is very good. Additionally, the FDP's treasurer Harald Christ could act as the liaison in the initial phase of the talks; he shifted parties from the SPD to the FDP during the just-completed term of the Bundestag. Theoretically, an SPD-Green-Left alliance could also arise, although due to the deep divergence among their manifestoes (especially in foreign and security policy, but also in economic matters), this is unlikely. In the case of coalition negotiations between the SPD, the Greens and the FDP, the Greens will seek to take the ministry of foreign affairs (for example, under Baerbock) and a ministry for the field of climate (for example Robert Habeck; how the tasks are assigned between the ministries for climate and the economy will be important). The FDP would like the ministries of finance (under Lindner) and possibly development cooperation (for example, Alexander Graf Lambsdorff).
- The negative campaign against the SPD can be expected to intensify in the near future. Their opponents will try to undermine the image of Scholz, recalling the financial scandals related to his time governing Hamburg as well as his stewardship of the Ministry of Finance; the Christian Democrats in particular will highlight the threat of 'Germany turning left' in a possible SPD-Green-Left coalition which could advocate radical social and economic demands, such as limiting the working week to 30 hours, increasing paid leave to 36 days a year, or introducing a minimum pension of €1200 net per month.