

## Angela Merkel's popularity continues to soar ahead of next year's German elections.

by Blog Admin

*The next German federal elections are due to be held in Autumn 2013. [Michael Miebach](#) writes that the opposition SPD are likely to find it difficult to counter Angela Merkel's popularity with the German electorate. Nevertheless, they may be able to build some momentum if they can secure a positive result in January's Länder election in Niedersachsen.*



It can be assumed that German chancellor Angela Merkel will enjoy a relaxed Christmas break this year. December just went so well for her. The party congress of the conservative CDU confirmed her as chairwoman with a 97.9 per cent backing. At the latest EU-summit, she made sure that potentially unpopular monetary union reforms were postponed until after the federal elections in September 2013. And in the polls, the CDU hit the magic 40 per cent line, while Merkel continues to stretch her personal lead over social democratic challenger Peer Steinbrück. Asked who should be chancellor, 54 per cent of Germans say Merkel, while 36 per cent come out in favour of Steinbrück. At the same time, 62 per cent believe the federal government is doing a "rather good" job. This is the highest approval rating since the beginning of the legislative period in 2009.

Meanwhile, Steinbrück is still licking his wounds after press outrage about the high fees he received for holding various lectures since he left office as finance minister in 2009. His extra earnings totalled up to 1.25 million euros, including 25,000 euros paid by the municipal utilities of the cash-strapped city Bochum. Ever since, the SPD-candidate for the chancellor's office has had a credibility problem.

Is he a candidate who could epitomise social democratic values and policies? This was the open question before the party assembly to nominate him as candidate for the elections on December 8th. Yes, he was! In a personal speech, Steinbrück convincingly outlined key areas of social democratic politics in the run up to the elections, putting social justice and the common good at the forefront: minimum wage, education, pensions, a quota for female representation in company boards, social mobility, and so on. Apparently, nine months before the election, his strategy is to broaden his profile rather than strengthening his reputation as a centrist economist and politician. However, at the same time, Steinbrück made the point that the necessary investments in the country's future were not to be financed by more public debt, but through higher taxes for the wealthy.



Considering the fee affair, it was clear from the outset that journalists would criticise this course. Some claimed Peer Steinbrück "submitted" to the left-wing of his party, thus losing radiance towards the political centre. I disagree. As a matter of fact, Steinbrück did not have much of a choice. Here is why:

Basically, Merkel's popularity boils down to her image as the defender of Germany's interest and as Europe's crisis manager, as well as a favourable economic situation. Yet, her domestic record is poor, especially with regard to social policies. Her strategy of triangulation – for example through agreeing to a minimum wage in specific sectors or establishing an “education package” for underprivileged children – was only partly successful. Most Germans will remember the governing coalition either for reducing the taxes of hotel owners, for controversial social measures such as care benefits for parents who do not send their children to a kindergarten (a measure dubbed “kitchen stove bonus” by the opposition), or for the lack of willingness to impose necessary structural reforms.

This blank space of the Merkel government is highlighted by a variety of recently published social studies. For example, the new “Report on Poverty and Wealth of the Federal Government” shows that private assets are spread more unequally than ever before. Today, the richest ten per cent of households own more than half of all assets. Another study published by the Bertelsmann foundation concludes that in the last 15 years, the middle classes have been shrinking and social mobility has become ever less likely. Not to speak of the various comparative studies by the OECD, where Germany regularly ends up at the bottom of the ranking lists, be it in terms of birth rates, gender equality, pensions or education.

The country might be an economic giant, but in social terms it is a ticking time bomb. It still profits from the social democratic reform agenda implemented ten years ago, but the current government failed to equip the country for the next ten years. As growth prospects are lowering, more people will become aware of this predicament. Hence, social issues offer Steinbrück much room for manoeuvre and polarisation. This is true especially since all polls show that social affairs are the only policy area where voters attribute more competence to the SPD than to the conservative CDU/CSU.

Apart from that, it has become almost impossible for the SPD to tackle the Conservative-Liberal government on the most pressing policy issue: European crisis management. All opportunities to distance the SPD from Merkel's approach have been avoided for stately reasons. While in the UK Ed Miliband's Labour party used the budget negotiations in Brussels to set-up a devastating parliamentary defeat for David Cameron, the SPD supported (almost) all government action with regard to Europe. This way, the party allowed Merkel to present herself as the eurozone's successful crisis manager (whereas today, even the IMF is sceptical of some of the enforced austerity measures). Although the SPD has announced that it will neither vote in favour of aid payments for Cyprus as long as there is support for money laundering, nor in favour of a change of the ESM in order to recapitalise banks directly, it is too late to distance itself from the government. This train has long left the station.

The European dilemma points to an underlying problem for the SPD. The party, which will celebrate its 150th anniversary next year, lacks self-confidence. Too many times avoiding mistakes was more important than fulfilling the role of the opposition and trying to gain *Deutungshoheit* over Angela Merkel. The social democratic despondency may also be a drag during the election campaign next summer. The SPD is planning a door-to-door campaign, Obama-style, and will rely on mobilising party members and supporters. It remains an open question whether enough people can be motivated in order to make a difference.

Yet the Länder election in Niedersachsen on January 20th might give a boost to the SPD: chances are good that the social democratic candidate, Stephan Weil, will succeed incumbent conservative Minister President David McAllister, if he manages to form a coalition with the strong Green party. Then, an upward trend in the polls at the beginning of 2013 will be crucial. Because if a coalition of the SPD and the Green party remains unrealistic, the dilemma of the 2009 campaign might emerge again, when candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier seemed to have no strategic option to form a governing coalition and become chancellor.

If history repeats itself, Angela Merkel's Christmas in 2013 may be even better than this year's party.

*This article is a contribution to [State of the Left](#) – Policy Network's monthly insight bulletin that reports from across the world of social democratic politics.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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