

## If his party unites behind him, social democrat Peer Steinbrück will push Angela Merkel right to the wire in the 2013 German federal election.

by Blog Admin

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) have named Peer Steinbrück as their candidate for Chancellor in the 2013 federal elections. [Michael Miebach](#) assesses Steinbrück's chance of success, arguing that if the SPD unites behind him he should be able to position himself as a strong contender to Angela Merkel. His strategy will also depend on maintaining good relations with the German Green party (Alliance '90/The Greens) who the SPD would aim to enter into a coalition with after the election.



The 'troika' belongs to the past. The German Social Democrats' (SPD) strategy of stalling the announcement of their candidate for the 2013 federal election, instead of deploying a team of three leaders against Angela Merkel, turned out to be unrealistic in a media society. Now, the die is cast. The SPD will run with Peer Steinbrück, a veteran politician who was finance minister during the 2005 to 2009 grand coalition.

If one was to judge by body language alone, it can safely be said that the German Chancellor is taking Steinbrück very seriously: when he delivered his first speech as the designated candidate in the Bundestag, Merkel sat stonily on the treasury bank and paid close attention to her opponent. Unusually for her, she refrained from sending short messages while listening.

The conservatives have every reason to be nervous. Steinbrück enjoys a reputation as an efficient manager of the fiscal crisis of 2007/2008 and as a highly intelligent economics expert. Moreover, the former Minister-President of Germany's biggest state, North Rhine-Westphalia, is one of the most charismatic, eloquent and entertaining figures in German politics. Part of this appeal lies in his mixture of intellectual wit with a Rambo-style persona: Steinbrück often presents himself as the 'tough guy' who utters the unpleasant truth. Unlike Merkel, he radiates strong leadership. The SPD-candidate, therefore, has the potential to attract both middle class swing voters who are fed up with the unstable performance of the conservative-liberal coalition, and at the same time reach out to voters in the bottom third of society, many of whom did not vote in the 2009 election.



Peer Steinbrück Credit: SPD in Niedersachsen (Creative Commons BY SA)

Steinbrück may even be the SPD's secret weapon in the fight against Merkel's long-term strategy of "asymmetric demobilisation": i.e. weakening the opposition by moving towards the political centre and avoiding controversial topics. The background to this approach is that the social democratic electorate tends to stay at home on election day if it does not have a tangible incentive to vote; whereas, out of a sense of duty, the conservative voters show up regardless of what is at stake. That is why the SPD suffers more than the CDU if the voter turnout is low – hence the term "asymmetric" demobilisation.

Given his intellectual and rhetorical abilities, Steinbrück could therefore make the federal election a referendum on the future direction of the country – the worst case scenario for any asymmetric demobiliser. In addition – and this is very important – the fact that Steinbrück is 65 years old and looks back on a long political career, means he can credibly rule out any coalition option other than red-green (a coalition between the SPD and the Green party). Either he will become Chancellor, or he will retire. It will be him or her.

Tellingly, the recent [elections](#) in the Netherlands, where voters largely left behind the small political parties to vote along a clear centre-left versus centre-right axis, showed the mobilising effects when the struggle between two candidates [becomes a close two horse race](#). All of a sudden, politics is as interesting as sports. So, whereas it can be argued that Steinbrück represents a clear alternative to Merkel in terms of rhetoric and personality, questions remain over what his counter model would look like in policy terms. Among party officials, there is a widespread belief that the SPD should not actively address European crisis management in its campaign; the party should instead focus on social issues such as child care, gender equality, energy security, or the quality of education. “[The SPD must lead Merkel back into the domestic political arena](#)”, party strategist Matthias Machnig puts it, since after all, Merkel’s policy on Europe is immensely popular, while at home she has neglected many important reforms.

Two problems surround this approach. First, the European crisis will not go away and is likely to continue to dominate headlines in 2013, making it hard for the SPD to set a domestically focused agenda. In order to counter asymmetric demobilisation, Steinbrück cannot hide away. He will have to formulate a clear-cut alternative position to Merkel’s crisis management. At present, Steinbrück confines himself to criticising certain aspects of Merkel’s European policy, but supporting her general direction of travel. Yet, it is a good sign that he recently published a position paper on how to restrain the banking system, including a proposal for bank rescue funds to be financed by the banks themselves – a clear alternative to the plans set out by heads of state and governments to capitalise banks through the ESM.

Second, even though building a modern welfare state is one of his main political goals, he does not define himself by making overly empathetic social statements. Quite the contrary, many social democratic activists regard him as a cold-hearted, pro-business technocrat. This has to do with the fact that Steinbrück is a strong advocate of the “Agenda 2010” social democratic reforms and regularly attacks leftish social democrats for being old-fashioned and despondent (his intransigent attitude is one reason for his difficult relationship with the Green party as well).

The sour mood between the candidate and the party’s left-wing could become a real danger to his candidacy, especially as the left-wing strives for a roll-back of the pension reforms which the SPD implemented in government. Crucially, it appears that the inner-party pensions compromise was found at the end of October has saved Steinbrück from losing face. Having to promote a position on pensions which he does not agree on would have left him looking very unreliable in the realm of social affairs. Plus, the extra costs for pensions to be assessed in the budget would make him vulnerable to accusations of economic incompetence, particularly as the SPD has agreed not to make promises it cannot keep.

Bearing all this in mind, it is becoming evident that Peer Steinbrück depends on the support of party chairman Sigmar Gabriel for organising party support. And he depends on Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who leads the parliamentary group and maintains good contacts with the Green party. If the SPD wants to be successful in September 2013, the troika must continue to work together.

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*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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