


# 'Straight outta Würselen' and straight into the German Chancellery? Martin Schulz and the SPD's resurgence

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*Since nominating Martin Schulz as the party's candidate for German Chancellor, the SPD has experienced an upsurge in support that seemed unthinkable only a few weeks ago. [Julian Göppfarth](#) asks what lies behind the shift in support and whether Angela Merkel should now have serious concerns over her attempt to secure re-election.*



**Martin Schulz.** Credits: [Mettmann](#) (CC BY 3.0)

When Martin Schulz climbed the stage at the SPD's headquarters in Berlin on 29 January, he was greeted with cheers and a standing ovation from the massive crowd in attendance. Even from just watching the video of his first speech as a candidate for German Chancellor, one could feel the energy and enthusiasm in the air. SPD supporters would probably take a while to remember a similar atmosphere in the Willy-Brandt-House, the name given to the SPD headquarters in memory of the first SPD chancellor. Some may recall the re-election of Gerhard Schröder in 2002, but even this moment is now only a distant memory.

Since then, the Social Democrats have had to live with six different leaders that followed Schröder after his defeat in 2005. And since then, they have faced the same political figure on the other side: Angela Merkel. In all those years, following the disputed *Agenda 2010*, the SPD has lived through crises, two lost elections, political intrigues, two grand coalitions with Merkel's CDU, one term as the main opposition party and, overall, a decline in party membership and support in the polls. The once proud "people's party" that used to be able to win more than 40 per cent of the votes has since become accustomed to fighting to stay above 20 percent. There were even times in the aftermath of the refugee crisis when they feared the nationalist AfD could overtake them.

But in the last few weeks, something remarkable has occurred. Headlines that seemed unthinkable only a few weeks previously have appeared: [SPD leading in polls ahead of CDU](#); [Schulz makes CDU nervous](#). While Trump and Brexit left many shocked and paralysed, Schulz's candidacy for Chancellor has been met with an enthusiasm that even the most optimistic of SPD strategists could hardly have imagined. This has occurred even if Schulz has yet to present a clear programme or plan for realising his main, and essentially German Democratic promise, to "make Germany socially just again".

It would be difficult to argue that Sigmar Gabriel, who was widely expected to be the SPD's candidate to challenge Merkel, did not take the right decision in stepping aside. Indeed, by making way for Schulz, who ultimately became both leader of the SPD and the party's candidate for Chancellor, he achieved something of a coup, creating a sense of momentum and propelling Schulz and the SPD to their best polling results in years: from under 25 percent to more than 30 percent according to some polls.

But what lies behind this hype around Schulz? His focus on social justice alone cannot explain his popularity. Peer Steinbrück, the SPD's candidate against Merkel in the last federal election in 2013, also attempted to put social justice at the centre of his campaign and failed. As such, we must look for other factors that can help shed light on why Schulz and the SPD have experienced an immediate upswing in support.

Arguably, the most important factor is Schulz's personality and his background. On the one hand, he appeals to those from a progressive and pro-EU centre-left standpoint: a body of supporters that the SPD had increasingly lost to the Greens and even the "social-democratised" CDU under Merkel. On the other hand, he attracts some of the party's traditional clientele of "workers" who had turned away from the SPD following the *Agenda 2010* reforms. Coming "straight outta Würselen" (a slogan introduced by some of his young supporters in reference to a [famous album](#) by the hip hop group N.W.A and the small city close to Aachen in the far West of Germany where Schulz was brought up), Schulz's life symbolises the social-democratic ideal of upward social mobility.

He never graduated from high school, nor did he study. After a failed career in football, Schulz became depressed and turned to alcoholism in his mid-20s. Only with the help of friends and family did he later train to become a bookseller and opened his own bookshop. A few years later, at the age of 31, he started his political career by becoming the Mayor of Würselen. In 1994, he was elected member of the European Parliament and eventually became its President in 2012. Repeated over and over again by Schulz and the SPD, this success story seems to endow Schulz with what most politicians lack in the eyes of many past SPD leaders – authenticity and trustworthiness. He seems to know what he is talking about when he argues for more social justice.

But this alone does not explain the enthusiasm he has sparked. Merkel was also elected for her trustworthiness. Schulz adds something essential that Merkel lacks: passion and an emphasis on feelings. His way of arguing in a passionate and eloquent way clearly puts him into sharp contrast with Merkel and her more technocratic and sober style of governance. Instead, Schulz openly refers to a feeling of existential economic fear that has spread not only among the most marginalised but also among parts of the middle class.

Finally, his lack of a clear political profile and national political background also helps him to present himself as a new face and a true alternative. An alternative not only to Merkel, but also to the "old SPD", that, as a matter of fact, has been part of the government for most of the past 20 years and has been responsible for many of the neoliberal policies that Schulz is openly criticising now.

Yet some see this focus on his personal story and the fears of the marginalised, alongside his lack of a clear programme, as his main weakness. Merkel's Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble has [compared Schulz to Trump](#), calling him a populist that aims to position himself against the establishment rather than presenting a clear programme that would offer a serious alternative to Merkel. Schäuble's unusually strong words suggest an increasing nervousness among the CDU leadership. After being challenged by the AfD from the right, the conservatives now fear losing the more progressive parts of the centre, where Merkel has managed to dominate for so many years.

Finally, Schulz's experience as President of the European Parliament may catch up with him. *Der Spiegel* has [reported](#) that Schulz was involved in dubious payments to his staff in Brussels and it is likely that Schulz's apparently clean record will receive further blows before the election in September. It remains to be seen if he will still be able to push Merkel off her throne or if, as many of his critics and opponents hope, his momentum will fade as soon as he is obliged to take a clearer stance on how his agenda will be realised and more light is shed on his past. What is sure, though, is that after only two weeks as a candidate, Schulz has already brought back something that has clearly been missing in the past two German elections: a sense of suspense and excitement.

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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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