

# Merkel vs Schulz: The return of the left-right divide or just another boring German election campaign?

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*The German social democrats (SPD) have experienced rising support in opinion polls following the selection of Martin Schulz, the former President of the European Parliament, as the party's candidate for chancellor at the upcoming federal elections in September. [Julian Göppfarth](#) asks whether the re-emergence of the SPD will lead to a more polarised contest, with a clear choice between the left and the right, or whether the recent pattern of convergence between the SPD and Angela Merkel's CDU will ultimately continue once the campaign is fully underway.*



On 19 March, Martin Schulz officially took over as the new leader of the German social democrats (SPD). He received 100% of the votes, a result that is unprecedented in the history of the party. And this enthusiasm reaches beyond its members. Since the SPD has announced Schulz's candidacy for chancellor, the party has reached a ten year high in the polls. Many are delighted that after almost a decade of grand coalition, minor differences and "narcotisation", Germany finally looks set to have an interesting election campaign again. The "new SPD" under Schulz also has the potential to bring back genuine left/right polarisation to German politics. But is this really the case?

If one talks to British, American, Dutch or French friends, it has become difficult to explain this so called "new polarisation" in German politics. The UK had the choice between Brexit and Remain, the US between Trump and Clinton, the Dutch recently between Rutte and Wilders, and, in just a few weeks, the French are likely to have to decide between Macron and Le Pen. There is no need to explain the essential differences that voters must consider while casting their votes in these cases.



**Martin Schulz and Angela Merkel at an EU Summit in Brussels. Credits: [European Parliament](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)**

In this light, the alleged polarisation taking place in Germany may classify as wishful thinking. Indeed, Merkel vs Schulz does not sound like a dramatic choice at first glance. [One commentator](#) recently claimed that the only

difference between Schulz and Merkel would be the former's beard. However, with Schulz now being the official leader of the SPD (and not a member of the incumbent CDU/SPD government as his predecessor Gabriel was) the election campaign is likely to get more intense, at least by German standards. It's therefore worth looking at this "polarisation" and the extent to which the two candidates and parties have tried to sharpen their profile during the campaign so far.

Let us start with Schulz and the SPD. Ever since his candidacy was made public, he has tried to describe Germany, according to the classic social democratic narrative, as being socially unjust. He has repeatedly warned of the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor, which he ascribes to a lack of public investment in infrastructure and education, and, in more general terms, the neoliberal dogma of the past 20 years. He has also announced his intention to fight for the growing number of employees who are unable to gain enough to live on despite full-time employment and in some cases even multiple jobs. To address this, he has called for a correction of the *Agenda 2010* reforms introduced more than a decade ago under Gerhard Schröder – reforms that many perceived as going against the core principles of the SPD.

Yet, in terms of outlining specific policy proposals, Schulz has been rather reluctant. The most precise proposal he has presented so far is to increase the duration and amount of unemployment benefits for older job seekers and to grant the unemployed a "right to professional training". This is supposed to give the unemployed the chance to qualify for new jobs while receiving state support. He has also called for free education from kindergarten to apprenticeship and university. In his speech after securing the party leadership, he underlined that granting the same chances to all would increase German competitiveness, not hamper it.

On Europe, a recent meeting between French presidential hopeful Emmanuel Macron, former SPD leader and now foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel and Jürgen Habermas in Berlin shed some light on a possible reorientation of German EU politics in the case of an SPD victory. During the one hour panel discussion, Gabriel urged the SPD to campaign on increased investments in the Eurozone. Germany has benefited from its EU membership and it would be time to give something back. Yet doubts remain that Schulz would bring a real change in EU policy. Politicians like the former green foreign minister [Joschka Fischer](#) expect no difference at all between Merkel and Schulz on that matter.

Schulz has also refrained from personally attacking Merkel. Whenever he has been asked to indicate the extent to which he represents an alternative to Merkel, Schulz has stated that he'd instead like to focus on explaining his project and then the voters can decide on the differences. This mixture of a critical description of the status quo with a vague plan for change in the future appears to be rather successful so far. With Schulz credibly representing the hope for a stronger emphasis on the "social" dimension in the classic German "social market economy" model, the party has been [stable around 30% in the polls](#). More than that, almost half of Germans see the social democrats as the [most reliable defenders of social justice](#).

The SPD's sudden rise in the polls has taken the CDU by surprise. Merkel has yet to say anything concrete on the subject, with only a few minor figures in the party stating that the rise under Schulz will be short-term, with support likely to decrease when detailed policies are outlined. [Wolfgang Schäuble](#) has, however, labelled Schulz a populist, even to the extent of comparing him to Trump. And with the polling showing consistent support for the SPD, a more coherent campaign line against Schulz will inevitably emerge.

The main thrust of the attack is likely to be that while the SPD would warm up the recipes of the past, which had successfully been overcome by the *Agenda 2010* reforms, the CDU would focus on the future of Germany. To that end, CDU politicians have announced a new *Agenda 2025*, though without giving concrete details on its content. This is remarkable because while the SPD is currently criticising its own legacy when implicitly distancing itself from *Agenda 2010*, the CDU is effectively defending Schröder's reform package and using it to portray itself as the party of the future. In an [interview](#) in March, Merkel stated that instead of talking about increasing public spending or fighting battles of the past, the CDU will focus on making life easier for those who create jobs, especially the small and medium size companies of the *Mittelstand*. There has already been some discussion about the party planning

to undertake [‘the biggest tax cuts in the history of the federal republic’](#) to meet these aims.

Alongside this emphasis on supply side policies, the party also has an eye on those conservative voters it has lost to the new populist right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). According to one leading CDU politician, the political centre in Germany has effectively moved to the right. As a consequence, the CDU should, under this line of argument, move to the right as well. One can already observe what this means in the party’s [silent abandoning](#) of Merkel’s open stance on asylum and immigration. Under the pressure of the CSU, the CDU’s Bavarian sister party, as well as the AfD, leading CDU politicians have recently called for the [end of dual nationality](#), the [banning of the burka](#), and some have also voiced opposition to [same sex marriage](#).

This has also gone hand in hand with calls to make security, as well as law and order, core topics of the election campaign. Interestingly, just like Schulz, Merkel herself has been reluctant to use strong personal attacks and has left this business to others in her party. Reinforcing her image of the strong, reliable and experienced world leader, some of the party’s spin-doctors have justified her relative silence with her being “busy governing and representing the country in these turbulent times”.

In sum, after almost ten years of grand coalition and convergence in many policy areas, both parties seem to be moving towards a more traditional left-right dynamic. Yet, their concrete propositions are still vague and the country is far from facing the dramatic choices many of its European neighbours are experiencing. Talk of a new “polarisation” in German politics might simply indicate how desperate many Germans are for credible political alternatives, be they represented by old or new political parties.

Against this backdrop, the CDU/CSU and SPD are increasingly making use of populist discourse. Martin Schulz’s appointment as the leader of the SPD may start a new phase, with more intense debates and sharper political profiles. And this might indeed lead to a new type of polarisation, at least by German standards. To know what this means in terms of concrete policy proposals, we will have to wait until June and July, when both parties will decide on their respective campaign programmes. Yet, we can already say now that Germany is unlikely to see the degree of polarisation one can observe elsewhere. And maybe, even at the risk of having a more boring election than other countries, it is better that way.

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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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