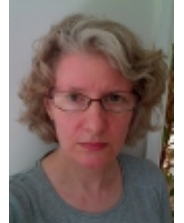


Peer Steinbrück's campaign gaffes pose a major problem for the SPD in Germany's upcoming election

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/09/16/peer-steinbrucks-campaign-gaffes-pose-a-major-problem-for-the-spd-in-germanys-upcoming-election/

16/09/2013

*One of the key aspects of the German election campaign is the personal contest between the two main Chancellor candidates, Angela Merkel of the CDU, and Peer Steinbrück of the SPD. **Patricia Hogwood** writes that although Steinbrück has fought an extensive campaign, his efforts have been undermined by a number of blunders. Moreover, the fact that he has ruled out entering a grand coalition with the CDU might also put his position in the SPD under pressure, should the rest of the party be prepared to jettison the face of their campaign for a place in government.*



In Germany, as in many European countries, the increasing 'presidentialisation' of electoral politics means that the personality and performance of the party's leading candidates is key to success at the polls. So what chance does a party have when its leading candidate manages to offend or alienate almost all electoral groups, including some of the party faithful themselves? This is the problem facing the social democratic SPD in the upcoming election of 22 September.

Peer Steinbrück, the SPD's 'chancellor candidate', is campaigning in the hope of leading a future left-leaning coalition government in Germany. The odds are stacked against him. The beleaguered SPD has suffered a string of regional election defeats and a major decline in membership since an unpopular welfare reform brought in by the SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in 2003 and 2004. A new Left Party formed from a breakaway left-wing faction of the SPD and the reformed communists of the former GDR. This has effectively split the vote on the left of the party spectrum. The incumbent Chancellor Angela Merkel's centre-right coalition, while not commanding an overall majority in the polls, is tried and tested. A potential centre-left coalition comprising SPD, Greens and the more radical Left Party does have the edge in [current polls](#), but it seems unlikely that any government led by Steinbrück would include the Left Party.



Peer Steinbrück, Credit: SPD-Schleswig-Holstein (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Under these circumstances, a lot will hinge on Steinbrück's personal impact. In the run up to the election, though, Angela Merkel, the incumbent CDU Chancellor, is [twice as popular](#) with the general public as Steinbrück. Her nickname 'Mutti' (Mummy) conveys affection for her from some quarters and at least tolerance from others. She is seen as a safe pair of hands and generally credited for steering Germany through the worst fall-out of the economic crisis, even though economic experts attribute this more to trade union [wage restraint](#) than government policy. Support for Merkel is even relatively high amongst opposition [Green voters](#), with some 45 per cent polled indicating that they would prefer her to stay at the head of the government after the election.

All the evidence suggests that Steinbrück has a lot of ground to make up. Knowing they were on the back foot, the SPD launched an early campaign at the end of July, with a [punishing schedule for Steinbrück](#) averaging two public events per day until the campaign's end. No-one can say Steinbrück's campaign lacks effort, but an unfortunate reputation for gaffes goes before him. An emotional and impulsive person, he seems to have a knack for rubbing

people up the wrong way.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of his public persona is a perceived arrogance and lack of connection with low-income households. Steinbrück's professional expertise is in fiscal policy. In consequence he tends to favour curbs on social policy, an area which demands heavy budget commitments. However, he must now front an SPD campaign framed around the theme of social justice. Steinbrück is on record as saying that he thinks [the chancellor's salary is too low](#): implying that he'll be angling for a pay rise if he gets into office. His personal income is already an issue – he's reported to have made [€1.25 million](#) between November 2009 and July 2012 in fees for speaking at events, even though he was receiving a salary as an elected member of parliament at the time.

All this sits uneasily with the SPD's heritage as the party of the working class and certainly doesn't endear him to voters on a low income. What is particularly unfortunate about this is that one of the most voter-friendly aspects of Angela Merkel's personality is her modest lifestyle – she prefers to live in a small flat rather than the luxury formal Chancellor's residence she would be entitled to. She still cooks her own food. Steinbrück has also claimed that Angela Merkel has an [advantage in politics in being a woman](#). This has annoyed many women as it is patently no more the case in the higher ranks of politics than it is in other high-ranking professional positions in Germany.

Only this month, Steinbrück suggested that Angela Merkel lacks a connection with European politics because she grew up in the East of Germany under state socialism. This implied criticism not only of Merkel's ability, but also wider disrespect for East Germans generally. It also suggested that the SPD had a 'western' concept of Europe that was stuck in the past. His latest expression of dubious judgement is to allow the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to go to press with its magazine front cover showing him making an [obscene gesture](#). The paper runs a weekly series where it asks well-known figures to respond to questions with gestures, not words. Apparently, Steinbrück had been quizzed about his unflattering nicknames, including 'Peerlusconi'.

Of course, Steinbrück isn't the only one to stumble on the campaign path. Merkel's coalition partners, the liberal FDP, got into hot water when they inadvertently used the same images in an election broadcast from [stock footage](#) of a happy family out cycling as the right-wing radical NPD – and also an advert for dairy products. A photomontage of the odd juxtaposition of the three different campaign shots went viral, to the deep embarrassment of the FDP.

An [eerie occurrence](#) may yet have prophetic significance for Steinbrück's campaign. A series of eco-friendly SPD posters of their leading candidate dissolved in heavy rain to reveal vintage SPD election posters from the 1994 national contest. These featured the then chancellor candidate Rudolf Scharping. As is the case with Steinbrück now, Scharping had struggled to distinguish his policy platform from that of the incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl. His attempts to sway the voters with a message of 'the same as the CDU, but better' were ridiculed as 'Politik mit Bart' (politics with a beard), allegedly the only feature distinguishing Scharping from Kohl. Scharping himself was rather prone to gaffes and was later tarnished by [scandal](#). Did playing the kinder, friendlier card work for him? No. Kohl's coalition gained a narrow victory.

If European elections are now little more than a '[beauty contest](#)' between high profile candidates, it looks very much as if the Germans would rather settle for the low-key security of Angela Merkel over the impulsive Peer Steinbrück. The real quandary for the party will come after the election. Steinbrück has ruled out working under a Grand Coalition with Merkel after his previous unhappy experience. So would the SPD be prepared to jettison the face of their campaign for the sake of a stake in government?

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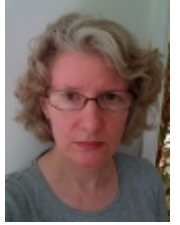
Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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