

## PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS AND OF VOTE DECISION IN GERMANY

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**Em Debate:** Do you conduct election opinion surveys?

**Rentate Kösher:** For each elections of the Bundestag, yes. This time it was, I guess, the sixteenth election of the Bundestag which we forecasted. And this time we had, as I believe, an average deviation of 0,8% of the actual results of the elections

**ED:** How can you explain that also in Germany the parties are suffering a crisis of politics disaffection by the population? Why do the people don't like parties anymore? That is an international phenomena, but why is the politics disaffection steadily growing since the 1980's in Germany, especially observed by the last election. What do the citizen think, do the think parties do not count anymore? How can one develop a democracy without parties?

**RK:** We do, since many years, always ask, if the people are disappointed by all parties presented in the Bundestag. Shortly before the last election the share of the people that were disappointed by al parties was very low. We do face the lowest turnout of elections since a long time and at the same time the lowest share of disappointed people since a long time. What is the reason for that? The party disaffection normally increases rapidly the moment the parties intervene in the life of the people. That means during the time of reform discussions the party disaffection was at the highest point, but this was an election which didn't affect the people. The people considered the election boring, but they also didn't fear that one of the parties would intervene in their lives. And therefore the electors were uninterested but not really disaffected by the parties. Therefore I think it is very important to separate between negative concepts of political stereotypes which

the majority of people do have, the politician does not have a positive standing the party even less, but the moment one charismatic figure appears, for example Mr. Gutenberg, who was directly very popular, and the willingness to deal with political topics in depth, which I do believe is the bigger problem than party disaffection. Especially the population, which is under thirty years old, is showing a significant decline of political interest, there are so many possibilities to enjoy one self, everything else is more interesting and joyful than boring politics. And today politics is also very pragmatical, which on the one hand is wanted by the people, but on the other hand the people do feel a yearning for charismatic persons, like Obama for example, who is very popular in Germany, and are hoping that politics could be a promise for cure, but the people are realistic enough to know that this won't happen.

**ED:** And personalization is becoming more important to win a election?

**RK:** Person are very important, in times with declining consumption of daily press, the visual medium is becoming more important, the question is, how are person perceived by the people through the visual media, but persons are very important!

**ED:** But in Germany the parties do have a strong history for example the civic parties, FDP and CDU. How do these parties behave on TV, do they pursue different strategies to “entertain” the people?

**RK:** I think the two major parties are right now a little bit clueless, because their electoral results have continually declined. This time we are faced with results of the Bundestag election in which the two major together just received about 55% of the votes. And therefore, of course, there do exist an intensive process of discussion in how far one has to align election campaigns differently in the future. This time, for example, the parties provided little information through the election campaign, because with a high informative one, to the point conducted election campaign, that would mean an election campaign that informs about the political goals, like 2002, the parties didn't have good experiences. Of course that was also due to the political goals which the parties tried to inform the population about like welfare state reforms, increase of value added taxes, and so on, these topics surely didn't help to raise popularity. And therefore this time the parties concentrated on advertisement by billposting, a short election campaign, mainly, if possible, only through persons and little statements of facts.

**ED:** But don't you think that there existed a focus on tax policies?

**RK:** Not really. That wasn't a main focus for the electors because they didn't believe that a tax relief would be possible. So the voters were convinced that there will not be a tax relief. The CDU did announce tax reliefs during the election campaign. The FDP did demand tax reliefs during the election campaign but finally it wasn't relevant for the elections because the electors considered this as a typical election promise and therefore the population didn't debate on this.

**ED:** The electors did vote, tax policies were in the focus, but still it didn't affect the elections?

**RK:** It wasn't relevant for the elections! The vote decision was mainly influenced by the economic situation. Before of elections we always investigate on a question, that is we ask the people: what are the elections about? About what is decided on through these elections? And this time, by fare, the most common answer was: these elections are about the progress of the German economy and to overcome the crisis. And the second most common answer was: these elections are about putting a more efficient government in place for Germany which commits less faults. And everything else was mostly unimportant. Concerning taxes hardly nobody believed that as an elector one can decide on tax reliefs through one's vote.

**ED:** But wouldn't you consider that elections are about facts?

**RK:** Yes, but taxes weren't important. And also special strategies how to overcome the crisis weren't crucial, so that the parties didn't argue about that. It was more like the whole legislative period there wasn't a majority for the civic parties until the beginning of this year, one can also say after the economic and financial crisis were developed, from october till december, from this moment on, suddenly, over the following month till the elections there existed an undoubted majority for the civic parties (CDU and FDP). That did show that for the electors there was just one objective which was to bring into power a government that has the capacity to overcome this economic situation.

**ED:** The economic situation was decisive?

**RK:** The economic situation was decisive! And most interesting, at the beginning of the financial crisis the left parties did believe that the crisis would help them for the elections. Because the population was fed up with what was happening concerning the banks and therefore originally it was more likely to expect an anti-economic or anti-capitalism atmosphere would evolve but that wasn't the case. Instead the feeling that economy and population have to stand together now to overcome this situation

collectively was growing in the population that means the connection was getting stronger and not the separation

**ED:** So even though in light of the crisis there wasn't evolving an atmosphere of anti-capitalism!?

**RK:** No, but I mean the strong downfall of the SPD has, on the other hand, a long history. The story begins more or less 1999 so one year after the SPD overtook the government. 1998 the SPD overtook the government with the promise to undo the welfare state reform which were planned or even have been started in front of the elections. And 1999 the SPD finally strongly announced welfare state reforms which were surprising and depressing for their electors. Then there was the "Agenda 2010", all the reforms of the employment sector, and the classical left-wing voters thought that it can not be possible that a left-wing party is conducting such policies. This finally ended in the defeat in the 2005 elections, but with a result of 32%, which still was kind of good. But that meant that the SPD had to participate more or less as a junior associate in the government and ended up making civic policies. To get worse for the SPD at the end of this government the economic crisis started which forced the government to continually support the economy, so there didn't exist any more cleavages between the civil parties and the SPD, solely between government and "Linkspartei" but not between SPD and CDU. And the last government was never considered as a merger of equals by the population but as a CDU government which is joined by the SPD. And therefore the economic crisis didn't lead to a class conflict, as one would have been able to guess initially, but led to the feeling among the population that everybody has to stick closer together.