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## Germany Update

### *Current Issues in German Politics*

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## Election Special

### The Outcome of the Federal Election

On September 22, more than sixty million Germans were asked to elect a new *Bundestag*. It was a very close race, but after a long and suspenseful election night, chancellor **Gerhard Schröder** and his coalition of Social-Democrats and Greens came out on top. Schröder's SPD gathered 38.5% of the vote, which is a loss of 2.4% in comparison to the last election in 1998. The conservative challenger **Edmund Stoiber** and his CDU/CSU received only a few thousand votes less and also achieved a 38.5% share, which is an improvement of 3.4% compared to 1998. The Green Party of Germany's most popular politician, foreign minister **Joschka Fischer**, celebrated the surprising success of 8.6% (+1.9%), whereas the Free Democratic Party remained disappointing fourth with 7.4% (+1.2%). The FDP had entertained the ambitious goal of 18% and was widely expected to at least overpower the Greens. According to most pundits, it was this unlikely weakness of the liberal party that precluded a change in government. The socialist party PDS will no longer be part of the parliament since they only garnered 4% and thus clearly missed the 5%-threshold. Because of the German system of personalized proportional representation, however, two socialists, who won the majority of votes in their districts, are members of the next *Bundestag*. Total voter turnout was at 79.1%, which is slightly less than last time.

Translated into mandates, this means that the SPD remains the strongest parliamentary group with 251 seats (- 47)<sup>1</sup>. CDU/CSU gain three, amounting to 248 seats in total. The Greens get 55 (+8), the FDP 47 (+4), and the PDS 2 (- 34) seats. Thus, the weakened Red-Green coalition still controls 306 of 603 seats, four more than the so-called chancellor-majority requires. The chancellor will be elected by the *Bundestag* on October 16.

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<sup>1</sup> One needs to be careful about this comparison to the last *Bundestag*. Due to a re-arrangement of districts, the new parliament is more than 60 seats smaller than before.

## The Price of Schröder's anti-American Ploy

For the longest time during the campaign, most observers were sure that the election would bring a change in government. Only in the last weeks chancellor **Schröder** could turn this trend around—based on three crucial events and issues: his performance in the second TV-debate, his management of the flood disaster, and, last but not least, his strong stance on Iraq. Indeed, it may have been the first time that foreign policy at least partly decided a German election.

In reaction to president **George W. Bush's** repeatedly voiced desire to remove **Saddam Hussein's** dictatorship in Iraq, the chancellor definitely ruled out any German participation in such an "adventure." As long as the rebuilding of Afghanistan was not complete, and as long as there was no comprehensive peace plan for the Middle East, it was wrong "to define a new spot of conflict," **Schröder** said and characterized that as the "German way". Even if the UN should agree upon a mandate for collective action, Germany would not join such a "disastrous" mission. These and similar remarks did not only lead to an unprecedented isolation of the Federal Republic in Europe and the world, but also drew pronounced criticism of the U.S. ambassador to Germany, **Dan Coats**, and leading figures of the German opposition. **Dr. Edmund Stoiber, Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble** and others called Schröder's blunt words "irresponsible" and "extremely dangerous." Dr. Stoiber accused Schröder of "undermining the position of the UN" and "damaging the German-American friendship." "Schröder's decision comes too early, violates the rules of diplomacy, and harms Germany's vital interest," Dr. Schäuble said. It is worth noting, however, that hardly any key politician pointed to the fact that the entire debate on a German participation in a military operation against Iraq is actually highly artificial. For the time being, there are no signs that the Bush-Administration will ask for European *military* support in a potential attack on Baghdad - except perhaps for British forces.

The sad high point of the "poisoned atmosphere" (**Condoleezza Rice**) between Germany and the U.S. was a statement by German justice minister **Herta Däubler-Gmelin** in the week before the election. At a campaign event, Däubler-Gmelin reportedly said about president **Bush's** plans to invade Iraq: "Bush wants to distract from his domestic problems. It's a popular method. Even Hitler did that." Moreover, she talked about the "lousy" American justice system and suggested that president Bush belonged in jail because of his rumored inside trading in the eighties. White House spokesman **Ari Fleischer** called the incident "outrageous and inexplicable." Subsequently, chancellor **Schröder** wrote a letter of apology to president Bush, which was received coolly in the White House. The day after the election, Däubler-Gmelin resigned.

Today, German-American relations seem to be at their lowest point since World War II. **Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, William Safire, Jesse Helms** and many others spoke out against **Schröder's** isolationist and anti-American course. After Schröder's election victory, president **Bush** did not transmit the usual congratulations. Instead, White House insiders spoke of an enduring irritation between the two leaders, caused by Schröder's "abusive" campaign. Similarly, at the NATO summit in Warsaw, Secretary of Defense **Donald Rumsfeld** refused to meet with "that person"—meaning his German counterpart **Peter Struck** (SPD).

**Schröder's** anti-American war-scare may have managed to rally a substantial electoral support, but he had to pay too high a price for it, since this has deliberately destroyed the personal chemistry between him and the American president. Now it needs to be his main concern to mend the ties with the U.S. Many Germans are immensely critical of his ill-conceived diplomacy. **Edmund Stoiber**, for example, announced a trip to the U.S. in order to "regain political trust and point out that Schröder's anti-American sentiment during the campaign is not typical of Germany. We know that a thriving European-American relationship is crucial to German interests." Hopefully, the Schröder administration will quickly return to this conviction as well.

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