

3. See, for example, the special issue "The 2005 Bundestag Election," 24, no. 1 (Spring 2006). Also see Kimmo Elo, "The Left Party and the Long-Term Development of the German Party System," 26, no. 3, (Autumn 2008).
4. Infratest dimap *ARD-DeutschlandTRENDS* August I, August II, September I and September II.
5. For detailed analyses see Ingolfur Blighdorn and Uwe Jun, eds., *Economic Efficiency—Democratic Empowerment: Contested Modernization in Britain and Germany* (Ilanham, 2007).
6. Infratest dimap *Sonntagsfrage*: Verlauf seit 1997; <http://www.infratest-dimapa.de/?id=51>; accessed 10 March 2009.
7. Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Peoples* (Princeton, 1977).
8. See Christoph Egle's contribution in this issue.
9. The contributors would like to express our gratitude to the Anglo-German Foundation for their generous support of this event.

NO ESCAPE FROM THE LONG-TERM CRISIS?

The Social Democrats' Failure to Devise a Promising Political Strategy

Christoph Egle

Political Science, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich

ABSTRACT

The result of the 2005 Bundestag election provoked difficult questions concerning the political positioning of the SPD. Should the Social Democrats negate the Schröder government's Agenda 2010 reforms in order to regain voters from the Left and envisage a government coalition with the Left Party, even though this party has been portrayed as "unfit to govern"? Or should the SPD stick to the center, at the risk of losing even more voters to its leftist competitor? Based on a theoretical concept of different party goals (vote, office, policy, and democracy-seeking) and strategic party behavior, this article explains why the SPD did not succeed in establishing a promising strategy with regard to these questions. This failure is caused mainly by the party's internal divisions and its severe leadership problems. In addition, the structure of German party competition and the institutions of federalism make it even more difficult to handle these problems with success.

KEYWORDS

political parties; Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); party organization; political strategy; party competition; party goals; party leadership

Introduction

Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) is in the midst of a deep and persisting crisis. Remarkably, the discussion about this crisis dates back nearly to the time when the party returned to governmental power on the federal level in the autumn of 1998. At the latest after then-party chairman and Minister of Finance Oskar Lafontaine suddenly stepped down after

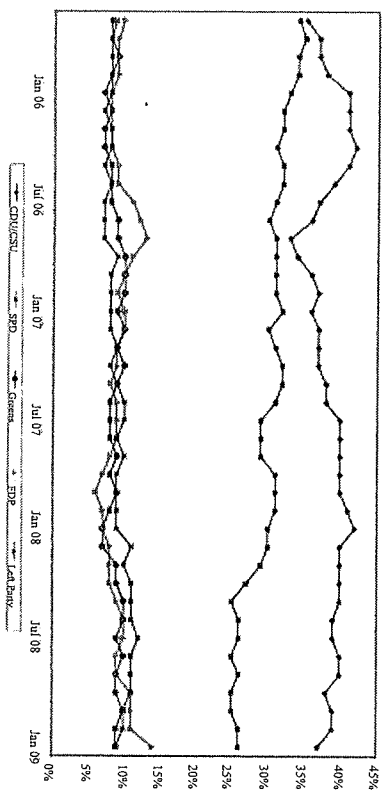
only six months in government, it became obvious that the party was deeply divided on the topic of economic and social policy. Moreover, the SPD was unable to benefit from its rather unexpected re-election in 2002. During the subsequent implementation of highly unpopular labor market and welfare state reforms (Agenda 2010), the party's crisis became acute. Rapid decline in party membership (a more than 30 percent loss since 1998) coincided with all-time low public opinion poll results and considerable vote losses in almost all Länder elections. The reasons for this crisis can be traced back mainly to the fact that after Lafontaine's resignation the Schröder government introduced reforms, which had been opposed keenly by the SPD when it was in opposition.² In fact, in the 1998 election campaign the SPD had pledged to reverse the contested welfare state reforms of the Kohl government—which it did—but only to re-introduce these exact policies in the following years.³ This repositioning provoked a lasting loss in the party's credibility, the more so as party leader and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder did not succeed in developing a convincing legitimizing discourse for Agenda 2010. Instead, he simply referred to the Thatcherite mantra that "there is no alternative."

As a result, frustrated SPD members and trade union officials in the Western Länder finally founded a left-wing protest party, the Electoral Alternative for Employment and Social Justice (Wahlalternative Arbeit & soziale Gerechtigkeit, wasg). In the 2005 federal election, the wasg cooperated with the postcommunist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which until then had been represented only in the Eastern Länder, a situation resulting in the best ever result for the PDS (8.7 percent).⁴ Almost half of the SPD's 4.3 percent loss went to the wasg/PDS—another third to the CDU/CSU.⁵ How should the SPD have responded to this election result? On the one hand, voters rejected a conservative-liberal coalition, proclaimed as the goal by both the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats in the run-up to the elections in order to implement further free market reforms. Instead, a leftist coalition composed of the SPD, Greens and the wasg/PDS was at least arithmetically possible. One the other hand, most Social Democrats (and many Greens) had hitherto rejected—at least at the federal level—any kind of cooperation with the wasg/PDS that was portrayed as "populist," "irresponsible" and "unfit to govern." Thus, the SPD was faced with a strategic dilemma: sticking to Schröder's policies and forming a coalition government with the CDU/CSU implied the risk of losing even more voters to the wasg/PDS in the future, whereas negating the Agenda 2010 reforms and striving to forge an alliance with the wasg/PDS (and the Greens) would provoke severe inner-

party conflicts and a massive loss in the party's credibility, especially among middle-class swing voters.

As we know, the SPD finally agreed to forming the second grand coalition in the Federal Republic's history, after neither the Social nor the Christian Democrats had been successful in building an alternative coalition, for example a "traffic light coalition" (SPD-FDP-Greens) or a "Jamaica coalition" (CDU/CSU-FDP-Greens). Although the SPD remained in power, the grand coalition led by CDU party leader and Chancellor Angela Merkel turned out to be disadvantageous for the Social Democrats. While the CDU/CSU and SPD had scored an almost equivalent election result in 2005, since then the SPD has suffered a constant decline in the polls (see Figure 1). As a consequence, the prospects for the SPD to regain chancellorship after the 2009 election seem to be waning. The SPD's results in Land elections (*Landtagswahlen*) tell a similar story. After having experienced bitter defeats in every Land election from 2002 to 2005, the SPD again lost a substantial vote share in seven out of eleven elections at the Land level since the formation of the grand coalition, mainly because of the Left Party and due to former SPD supporters abstaining on a massive scale (see Table 1). Thus, there seems to be no way out of the party's persisting crisis.

Figure 1: Voting Intention in Germany, 2005-2009



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Politbarometer

So why is it that the Social Democratic Party did not succeed in overcoming its long-standing troubles? How has the SPD dealt with the open questions regarding coalition building in Germany's new fluid five-party system?⁶ What kind of strategy did it formulate to face the challenge of the Left Party and the dilemma mentioned above? These are the questions

that this article examines. Given that the SPD has failed for such a long time to establish a promising political strategy, I first discuss some general prerequisites for political parties' successful strategic behavior.

Table 1: SPD Election Results since 2005 (in percent) and Main Voter Trends

Election/Date	Result	Previous Result	Change	Main Losses to
Bundestag election 18 September 2005	34.2	38.5	-4.3	Left party, CDU
Baden-Württemberg 26 March 2006	25.2	33.3	-8.1	nonvoters, Greens
Rhinland-Pfalz 26 March 2006	45.6	44.7	0.9	only minor voter flows
Saxony-Anhalt 26 March 2006	21.4	20.0	1.4	only minor voter flows
Niedersachsen 27 January 2008	30.2	40.6	-10.4	Nonvoters
Berlin 11 September 2006	30.8	29.7	1.1	losses to nonvoters, gains from Left Party
Bremen 13 May 2007	36.7	42.3	-5.6	nonvoters, Left Party
Hamburg 24 February 2008	34.1	30.5	3.6	DA
Lower Saxony 27 January 2008	30.3	33.4	-3.1	nonvoters, Left Party
Heise 27 January 2008	36.7	29.1	7.6	gains from CDU, nonvoters, and Greens
Bavaria 28 September 2008	18.6	19.6	-1.0	Left "free voters" party
Heise 18 January 09	23.7	36.7	-13.0	nonvoters

Source: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, various election reports; <http://wahlen.kas.de>

Prerequisites for Strategic Behavior of Political Parties

Political parties are constantly confronted with strategic problems and decisions. Strategies may be defined as success-oriented "goal-means-environment calculations,"⁷ where success means to achieve an objective of individual choice at the lowest possible expense. Accordingly, a political party acts strategically when it pursues a clearly defined goal and has instruments and techniques at its command for achieving this goal in view of given but modifiable environmental conditions. As opposed to a mere tactical behavior, strategic acting is defined by a longer term perspective, i.e., a political strategy usually covers a period of several years.

That said, it is crucial to identify possible party goals. The most prominent theoretical approach in this context distinguishes between vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking endeavors.⁸ A vote-seeking party aims at maximizing electoral support, but might neglect government participation. Maximizing control over public office—for example obtaining cabinet seats—is the main task of office-seeking parties. In a multiparty system like Germany's, achieving office-seeking goals not only is determined by a party's vote share, but also by a party's ability to form a winning coalition. Therefore, a good relationship to other parties might be an asset, especially with regard to a party's leading personnel. But, even if office-seeking goals might be perceived as ends in themselves by some politicians, most parties also strive for maximizing their influence on public policy (policy-seeking).

As a rule, political parties pursue all three goals simultaneously, however, with different levels of priority. Concerning policy-seeking, it should be examined more precisely which kind of policy is intended to be implemented and what kind of inner-party conflicts might occur in this regard. This issue is linked to the quest for suitable coalition partners. As party activists usually pay more attention to policy-seeking goals, whereas party leaders are said to be more interested in gaining public office, these questions might be cause for disagreement between the leadership and the party's rank-and-file. In fact, parties should not be treated as unitary actors, although they typically try to "speak with one voice," as internal quarrels usually negatively affect a party's electoral success. As a consequence, it has been suggested that these three party goals should be complemented with a fourth one, i.e., extensive involvement by party members in all the party's relevant decisions in order to unify the party. This can be identified as (inner-party) democracy-seeking.⁹

Besides a clarification of party goals or the "political orientation" of a party, it also has been suggested to consider "leadership" as the second prerequisite for strategic competence.¹⁰ In fact, parties as collective actors need to be integrated by an undisputed leader or leadership committee in order to make and implement hard decisions that might become inevitable because of competing party goals.¹¹ Based on these assumptions, a party acts strategically only if we know what kind of policies it aims to promote, and if this policy-seeking priority is in accordance with vote, office, and democracy-seeking goals. We assume further that a party—especially its leadership—establishes a hierarchy of priorities regarding these goals and theoretically is more strategically successful, the fewer trade-offs there are among these four goals. Thus, the question becomes: to what extent has the SPD been strategically successful during the past few years?

The Ineffective Quest of the SPD for Leadership and Political Orientation

A Retrospective: The SPD from German Unification to the Agenda 2010

In retrospect, since the early 1990s, the SPD has not succeeded in clarifying its leadership and orientation issues. Its last effective strategic positioning was the revised party program from 1989—the so-called "Berlin Program"—which achieved an opening towards new social movements and the Green Party. Furthermore, the document paved the way for the idea of a "Red-Green project," indicating that a degree of coherence

among policy, office, and democracy-seeking goals was reached. As a consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the expeditious unification process, however, political conditions changed so fundamentally that this strategic project had no chance in the first all-German elections in 1990. Simultaneously, the Berlin Program, which had just been passed, already was overtaken by history—it gave no answers to questions concerning Germany's new role in a dramatically altered geopolitical environment, the survival of the welfare state in a globalizing economy, and the role of social democracy after the collapse of communism. A necessary clarification of these issues did not occur in the years to follow as internal party rivalries inhibited the resolution of the leadership question. In fact, the party leadership changed in 1991, 1993, and 1995. Only when Oskar Lafontaine took over the leadership in 1995, was a clear political orientation solidified. He shifted the party to the left and campaigned heavily against the labor market and welfare state reforms pursued by the Kohl government. This realignment was supported enthusiastically by the SPD's rank-and-file and proved to be successful in terms of vote and office-seeking as well. As a consequence, the aforementioned four goals seemed once again to be in harmony. Yet, leadership and policy issues had been decided only superficially, as Lafontaine and the quickly rising Schröder were not only long-standing leadership rivals, but also representatives of differing political concepts. Lafontaine advocated an expansion of the traditional welfare state and greater statism in the economy, while Schröder promoted supply side economics. In view of Schröder's significantly superior public opinion poll ratings, the decision to nominate Schröder rather than Lafontaine as the candidate for chancellor revealed a prioritization of vote and office-seeking interests vis-à-vis the goal of coherent policy-seeking. Lafontaine was completely aware of this trade-off and, therefore, tried to restrain Schröder with detailed programmatic provisions in the SPD's election manifesto.¹² The short-term tactics to combine Schröder's moderating profile with a number of popular and typically leftist election pledges primarily advocated by Lafontaine turned out to be successful in electoral terms. The fact, however, that the leadership question and major policy issues had not been resolved became obvious already six months later when Lafontaine abruptly resigned.

Following Chancellor Schröder's takeover of the party leadership, the issue was resolved for the time being. Nevertheless, the highly inconsistent political orientation regarding economic and social policies was not resolved until the formulation of Agenda 2010.¹³ It was only then that Schröder was able to implement a policy that he and the "modernizing"

faction of the party had demanded for quite some time, but had postponed repeatedly to avoid internal party conflicts and because of electoral considerations. The new course, however, was problematic as the party activists' demand for democracy-seeking was ignored and cuts in welfare state entitlements turned out to be a disaster in terms of vote-seeking.¹⁴ After the SPD's bitter defeat in the Land election in North Rhine Westphalia in May 2005, Schröder surprisingly announced his intention to hold Bundestag elections one year before the end of the legislative period, presumably to secure the SPD's participation in a grand coalition.¹⁵ Once again, this short-term tactical maneuver was successful, but it also confronted the party with the strategic dilemma mentioned above.

Unsuccessful attempts to reconcile the SPD with Agenda 2010 (2003 – 2006)

Schröder's extraordinary tactical maneuver was successful in terms of office-seeking goals. Contrary to public opinion polls, the CDU/CSU and its preferred coalition partner, the FDP, did not succeed in attaining a majority by announcing free market policies, which were proclaimed to exceed the SPD's Agenda 2010. Instead, after substantial gains by the PDS/WASG, there was actually a majority for a potential alliance between the SPD, Greens, and PDS/WASG. Cooperation with the PDS/WASG, however, was categorically excluded "for the entire century" by SPD leader Franz Münterfering prior to the elections¹⁶ and again on election night. Since the FDP was unwilling to form a coalition with the SPD and Greens, and the latter were against an alliance with the CDU/CSU and the FDP, a grand coalition was the only option. Thus, by entering a coalition with the CDU/CSU, the SPD, and in particular its leader and designated vice chancellor, Münterfering, made a clear decision in favor of continuing Agenda 2010 and against a rapprochement towards the Left.

As policy and office-seeking goals were thus clarified, the party leadership had to come back to the goal of democracy-seeking, which had been disregarded during the recent past, and make an attempt to reconcile the party's rank-and-file with the Agenda 2010 reforms. A suitable arena would have been the debate on a new party program which was to replace the Berlin Program. This process started after disputes concerning the so-called Schröder-Blair Paper presented in 1999.¹⁷ Yet, even though Schröder had initiated the necessary programmatic modernization of the party, as party chairman, he failed to complete the process.¹⁸ He even failed to take a stand on crucial issues for the party's identity, for example regarding the significance of social justice or whether the SPD still should pursue the goal of "democratic socialism." In spring 2004, following ongo-

ing criticism concerning his government, and incapable or unwilling to lead the party programmatically, he passed the leadership to Müntefering, the reliable party soldier and head of the Bundestag parliamentary group. During Müntefering's tenure as party leader, the task of establishing a new programmatic platform was taken seriously for the first time and directed towards a "moderate modernization."¹⁹ The first draft of a programmatic concept could not be presented to the public, however, because on the evening of its planned announcement, the decision in favor of preterm Bundestag elections was declared. As in 1998, preferential treatment of office and vote-seeking goals impeded a clarification of the SPD's long-term policy-seeking profile.

As the programmatic debate had to be postponed during the election campaign, Müntefering was only able to return to this task following the formation of the grand coalition and his appointment as vice chancellor. This renewed effort also failed. Still, during the coalition negotiations with the CDU/CSU, a majority of the SPD's party executive committee vetoed Müntefering's proposal to nominate his long-term assistant and confidant Kajjo Wasserhövel, then executive director of the SPD (*Bundesgeschäftsführer*), as the new general secretary of the party. Müntefering immediately announced his resignation as party chairman.

A decisive reason behind this internal coup was Müntefering's continuous neglect of democracy-seeking goals.²⁰ His nomination of Wasserhövel as the new general secretary was considered by the party's left wing as an attempt to subordinate the party once again to the necessities of governing—just like during the Schröder government. According to Andrea Nahles, a leader of the party's left wing, an independent profile for the SPD vis-à-vis the CDU/CSU—including positions critical of the grand coalition's policies—was essential. Nahles eventually ran for the office of general secretary against Wasserhövel and garnered more votes in the executive committee than the chairman's favored candidate. "Some people who voted for Andrea Nahles were concerned that the party would otherwise cease to exist," was the response from deputy party leader Ute Vogt on this unexpected result.²¹ Still open was the question regarding why not only members of the left wing—who feared a fixation on Agenda 2010 under Müntefering as party chair and vice chancellor—voted for Nahles, but also representatives of the pragmatic, younger "network" (*Netzwerker*) group, such as Ute Vogt and Hubertus Heil, who had always supported Agenda 2010. Obviously, the general secretary decision linked tensions concerning policy positions with generational conflicts. Thus, the "networkers" were in a position to provoke Müntefering's resignation by supporting Nahles. Blaming the left wing,

they simultaneously instituted a generational change at the top, a goal that had been particularly desired by the "network" group. In fact, an answer to the question *cui bono* supports this interpretation. On the very evening of Müntefering's "unexpected" resignation, Matthias Platzeck, the Brandenburg Minister President who was close to the "networkers," conferred with various SPD Land executives. The following day, Platzeck declared that he was willing to take over the party leadership.²² As his general secretary he suggested Hubertus Heil, one of the spokespersons of the "network" who previously had strongly supported Nahles.

Thus, as the leadership question again was resolved quickly in formal terms, a third attempt at inner-party reconciliation might have been successful. The prospects were quite favorable. Platzeck was known for a less authoritarian leadership style than Müntefering and was elected chair by a party convention with a record of more than 99 percent of the votes cast.²³ He obviously handled the democracy-seeking issue successfully. Platzeck might have been able to unite the party—all the more so because as an East German he was not involved in the persistent personnel rivalries of the West German party elite and was, therefore, not encumbered by any burdens of the past.

Yet, control of governmental and party activities now was divided between two people, as Platzeck, in his capacity as Brandenburg Minister President, was not a member of the federal cabinet. This division was not predicted to cause major problems because the new party leader displayed a similar policy course in form and content as Vice Chancellor Müntefering. In fact, Platzeck had defended Schröder's policies even during his federal state election campaign in 2004, when protests against the Agenda 2010 reforms hit their peak. Moreover, as a former civil rights activist in the German Democratic Republic, he distanced himself sharply from the Left Party/ PDS and, in Brandenburg, he headed a stable grand coalition with the CDU. Given a party chairman with such a profile who achieved very favorable opinion poll results both within the party and the electorate,²⁴ the prerequisites for clarifying the orientation issue seemed to be fulfilled. Platzeck actually took this task seriously and made efforts to incorporate the idea of a "preventive welfare state" as a programmatic leit-motif of the SPD.²⁵ Against the background of the party's previous tradition of measuring the welfare state's performance primarily against the level of compensatory social benefits, this endeavor continued exactly where Schröder had abruptly left off with the Schröder-Biar Paper. The process, however, once again could not be completed because Platzeck resigned after only five months due to health reasons.²⁶

Half-Hearted Shift to the Left and Confusion (2006-2008)

When Kurt Beck, Minister President of Rhineland Palatinate, took over party leadership in spring 2006 this issue again was clarified rapidly in formal terms. In form and content, Beck could be characterized as a traditional pragmatic. He had always supported the Schröder government though he was not a typical "modernizer." As Platzek before him, Beck did not join the federal cabinet. Although the SPD adopted a new party program under Beck's tenure in October 2007, the opportunity for setting the orientation issue was not used. Inter alia, this can be attributed to a number of strategically problematic decisions by Beck.

Initially, the new party leader did not send out any identifiable impulses for the programmatic debate. At the same time, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Minister of Finance Peer Steinbrück and Platzek promoted anchoring the Agenda 2010 heritage in the party's programmatic goals.²⁷ A few weeks before the new program was adopted, however, Beck executed a tactical shift to the left in order to win over the party's left wing and thus secure his inner-party power position. An unequivocal strategic positioning of the SPD thus was obstructed. Although Beck publicly disclaimed the assumption of a shift towards the left, he made at least three contradictory, or at least ambiguous, decisions. First, by choosing Nahles as one of three deputy party leaders, signaled the integration of the party's left wing. The two remaining deputy positions were assigned to the cabinet ministers Steinmeier and Steinbrück, two exponents of the right wing or "governing" SPD. Therefore, the newly tailored party leadership did not represent a recognizable strategic positioning, but rather impersonated the party's indecisiveness regarding its policies. Second, at the very moment when the media began to report that the Agenda 2010 policies were producing an economic revival and decreasing unemployment, Beck argued for extending unemployment benefits and thus for a symbolic correction of recent labor market reforms. In this regard, he even argued publicly with Vice Chancellor and Labor Minister Müntefering who considered such a policy change wrong, but was unable to make his point against Beck. The idea of a "preventive" welfare state, which at least was anchored at the declaratory level in the new party program, was foiled by this decision. Moreover, due to this distancing from Agenda 2010, the party passed up its chance to claim the reform dividend that finally had become apparent. Finally, Beck approached the party's left wing by prominently anchoring the term "democratic socialism" in the new party program. By adhering to this traditional claim, Beck complied with the request of many party members who had missed an aggressive commitment to the concept in the draft program.²⁸ In addition, the new Hamburg

Program now favored statutory minimum wages, which had always been rejected during the Schröder period.

By this tactical shift to the left, Beck in fact complied with the party's rank-and-file request for democracy-seeking, which had been ignored for such a long time. The SPD's political orientation, however, became even more confused. Those who had deemed Schröder's reforms courageous and justified must have had the impression that the party was moving away from Agenda 2010 and towards the Left Party. Yet, those who had rejected the reforms from the outset were still better off with the Left Party. Beck denied this change of direction, simultaneously stating that cooperation with the Left Party (except in the Eastern Länder) was not being considered by the party. Instead, Beck supported a coalition of the SPD, Greens, and FDP after the next Bundestag election. How his party would be more successful in implementing minimum wages and pursuing the goal of "democratic socialism" together with the neoliberal FDP, and not in an alliance with the Left Party, remained his secret. Policy-seeking and office-seeking became contradictory. Such a nebulous message was hardly the right strategy to win back voters from the Left Party.

Following the successful merger between the WASG and the PDS in summer 2007, the Left Party became a national party and succeeded in winning seats in the parliaments of two major West German Länder, Lower Saxony and Hesse at the beginning of 2008. The inconsistent reaction to the Left Party's challenge by meeting it halfway in policy terms, but excluding a coalition at the same time, obviously had failed. Against this background, Beck made his second big mistake. A few days before the Hamburg elections in February 2008 in an informal background discussion with the press, he gave his permission to the regional associations of the SPD (*Landesverbände*) to cooperate with the Left Party in the future.²⁹ As a matter of principle, this change of direction indeed was appropriate to overcome the previous inconsistencies. But, it was a severe tactical error not to have prepared this policy shift within the party committees, so that Beck now could even be accused of a disregard for democracy-seeking. With this solitary decision, Beck backstabbed his party that was campaigning in Hamburg and still promised not to cooperate with the Left Party. The party's credibility also was damaged severely when the Hessian SPD immediately negotiated a cooperative agreement with the Left Party, after Beck's about-face, thereby breaching one of its central election pledges.³⁰ Beck's claim that cooperation with the Left Party on the federal level still was beyond question was not convincing against this background. Moreover, the strategic confusion was now full-blown. Why should a strategy,

contradictory in terms of policy and office-seeking, continue to be pursued at the federal level, considering the attempt to correct this strategic mistake at the state level? As a consequence, the SPD has polled significantly worse since that time, declining towards an embarrassing 25 percent (see Figure 1).

The fragility of this new course once again became evident concerning the issue of an SPD candidate for the Federal Presidency. Although this office does not contain much political power, the parties' nominations have symbolic significance for their political profile or as signals to potential coalition partners. The SPD's disposition to reelect the incumbent Horst Köhler together with the CDU/CSU and the FDP could thus have been interpreted as an indication for continuing the grand coalition or for a potential alliance with the Free Democrats. Instead, in the absence of strong leadership by Beck, the party's left wing was able to push through Gesine Schwan, the SPD's unsuccessful candidate in the last election for Federal President in 2004. Considering that the CDU/CSU and the FDP control only a narrow majority in the *Bundesversammlung* (the body that elects the president) and that Schwan was able to win about ten votes from the conservative-liberal camp in the last elections,³¹ the call for an SPD candidate was indeed hard to decline. Although Schwan has to be counted with the party's right wing and is hardly suitable as a figurehead for an alliance with the Left Party, her candidacy was only conceivable with the Left Party's votes, which she aggressively courted. As a result, the pledge not to cooperate with the Left Party on the federal level became even less convincing.

Beck's effort to focus primarily on the democracy-seeking demands of the party—particularly from the left wing—and his half-hearted shift to the left not only impeded a harmonization of policy and office-seeking goals, but was also unsuccessful in regard to vote-seeking or polling results (see Figure 1). In the end, Beck resigned. His withdrawal from party leadership was also a delayed result of his decision not to join the federal cabinet. Such a move seemed appropriate at the time considering Müntefering's resignation from his cabinet offices shortly after passing the Hamburg Program in November 2007. Müntefering justified his resignation by citing his intent to care for his terminally ill wife, but the inner-party defeat against Beck concerning unemployment benefits might have contributed to his decision. If Beck, as the party leader, had replaced Müntefering as Minister of Labor and Vice Chancellor, he certainly would have been the party's "natural" candidate for chancellor. Instead, by assigning the vice chancellorship to the foreign minister, Steinmeier's role was enhanced. In view of the high public support for Steinmeier—73 percent of voters were

satisfied with his activities—and the enormous loss of prestige that Beck experienced in connection with his handling of the Left Party issue, Steinmeier was considered to be the by far better candidate for chancellor, both by SPD supporters and the electorate as a whole.³² According to his own proclamation, Beck, therefore, had decided some time before to cede the candidacy to Steinmeier, but to continue as party chairman.³³

Nevertheless, Beck resigned in early September 2008 after he—in his opinion—had been pressured internally. The fact that Steinmeier immediately suggested Müntefering³⁴ as Beck's successor—rumored in the press a few days before—supports the conclusion that this yet another abrupt leadership change had been prepared by the new duo. With this twofold personnel decision, Steinmeier and Müntefering accomplished what Beck had not been able to achieve in the course of two-and-a-half years: setting a clear political course, as both undoubtedly represented Schröder's political project. Thus, the chances for establishing a future coalition between the SPD, Greens, and FDP improved. This also makes it more likely that policy and office-seeking again will be reconciled. Of course, it may become problematic that party members were not involved in these crucial decisions: the democracy-seeking goal had been put last. Finally, the new leading duo was caught up by Beck's disputed repositioning towards the Left Party when the Hessian SPD for a second time tried to form a minority government with support of the Left Party. Yet, after four Hessian Social Democrats withdrew their support just one day before regional party leader Andrea Ypsilanti was to be elected new Hessian Minister President, the SPD's credibility was severely damaged again. While one part of the SPD's members and voters still did not excuse Ypsilanti's breach of promise, left wingers within the party and the electorate were disappointed with her obvious shortcomings in political skills. Thus, the SPD's loss of 13 percent in the January 2009 Land election surprised no one.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to answer the question how the SPD responded to the strategic dilemma it was confronted with after the 2005 Bundestag election. To this end, I applied the concept of strategic party behavior, utilizing distinctions among vote, office, policy, and democracy-seeking goals. Generally speaking, the SPD did not do very well in resolving its strategic problems because it did not succeed in establishing stable leadership, nor a coherent course with regard to these party goals. Instead,

Social Democrats zigzagged between different priorities and aims, never achieving a satisfying resolution to the trade-offs with which they were confronted. This trial and error approach can be traced back already to the early 1990s (see Table 2).

Table 2: The SPD's Trade-offs at Critical Moments

	Preferred Goal (by Leadership)	Neglected/Failed Goal	Result	Context
Berlin program 1989	policy-seeking (in accordance with office- and democracy-seeking)	vote-seeking	election defeat 1990	sudden change of geo-political environment (fall of the Berlin wall)
Election campaign 1998	vote-seeking (in accordance with office- and democracy-seeking)	(consistent) policy-seeking	Internal conflicts; incoherent policies	leadership divide (Lauterbach/Schröder, internal divide modernizers vs. traditionalists)
Agenda 2010 reforms (2003-2005)	policy-seeking	democracy- and vote-seeking	Internal conflicts; massive vote-losses	Schröder's failure as party leader (monocratic leadership style, bad discourse)
Formation of grand coalition 2005	office and policy-seeking	democracy- and vote-seeking	Internal conflicts (Müntzfering's resignation)	monocratic leadership style
Hamburg program 2007; "Aufbruchmoment" towards Left Party	democracy-seeking	policy- and office-seeking (in discord)	loss of confidence; vote losses	Beck's strategic mistakes

First, the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification disqualified the SPD's recently revised 1989 party program, and, thus, its prospects for regaining governmental power in 1990. It was only eight years later that the SPD returned to power. Nevertheless, the preferential treatment of vote and office-seeking goals in the 1998 election campaign impeded the clarification of policy statements and masked the unresolved leadership question. Indeed, the SPD still suffers today from the fact that it came to power without having answered adequately the question regarding what kind of social democratic policy might be appropriate with regard to the challenges of aging demographics, the knowledge society, and global economic competition. The efforts to do so and to establish a new party program were unsuccessful as Schröder—in his capacity of party chairman—did not handle this issue seriously and, since he stepped down, due to repeated changes in party leadership.

Nevertheless, after 2003, the Schröder government at least succeeded in establishing a clear policy-seeking profile. This attempt, however, provoked severe inner-party conflicts and massive vote losses in Land level elections. This course seemed to be continued through the formation of the grand coalition. Yet, the ongoing neglect of democracy-seeking aspirations backfired on Müntzfering's leadership, whereas Platzeck's inter-

mezzo was too short to succeed in reunifying the party. Thus, the question of how to deal with the post-election situation still is unresolved. Since the 2005 elections, it has been argued, government formation will be determined not so much by the distribution of votes, but more so by inter-party relationships. That said, the SPD could have decided either to approach the Left Party to form a SPD-Green-Left Party coalition in the future, or to remain in the center of the party system, thus being able to form a coalition together with the FDP (and the Greens) or to continue the grand coalition. Ironically, under the leadership of Kurt Beck, the SPD chose the worst of both worlds: it approached the Left Party in terms of policy pronouncements, thus jeopardizing an office-seeking strategy with regard to the FDP or the CDU/CSU. At the same time, the SPD formally ruled out a coalition with the Left Party. This strategic failure could hardly be revised by the new Müntzfering/Steinmeier leadership duo in the short run. As a result, confusion concerning the SPD's appropriate handling of the Left Party issue persists.

Obviously, neither vote nor office-seeking goals can be pursued successfully as long as the SPD is not confident about its policy-seeking efforts. However, neither top-down decision making by Schröder and Müntzfering, nor Beck's turn towards democracy-seeking contributed to a resolution of the crucial policy-seeking question. While Müntzfering's failure to reconcile the party with its previous policies has to be traced back to his authoritarian leadership style and a generational conflict within the party, Beck's efforts to "bring the party back in" and implement a half-hearted policy shift to the left provoked strategic contradictions in terms of office-seeking. But, an explicit shift towards an alliance with the Left Party would have been precarious as well, as a substantial part of the SPD rejects such a course, too. In such a context, democracy-seeking obviously does not contribute to integrating the party, but rather amplifies internal quarrels.

In sum, the evidence provided in this article suggests that establishing a political strategy aimed at bringing together vote, office, policy, and democracy-seeking is basically impossible, at least with regard to the SPD. Although Platzeck's health problems and Beck's strategic shortcomings might be treated quite simply as bad luck or lack of political skills, another explanation for the SPD's ongoing troubles can be distilled from the analysis provided in this article. As a party organization has to win elections and therefore should present itself as a unitary actor and "speak with one voice," the leadership cannot accept inner-party pluralism on critical policy issues or questions regarding coalition building. Otherwise, the party leadership must also listen to the party's rank-and-file and integrate differ-

ent party wings. Obviously, any SPD leadership will be trapped in this two-level game, the more so as the party's membership is internally divided, especially on crucial issues—i.e., Agenda 2010 and cooperation with the Left Party. Similar problems might occur within other (social democratic) parties as well. But there are at least two institutional constraints that explain why the German Social Democrats are experiencing more difficulties than, for example, the British Labour Party. First, the structure of German party competition is extremely unfavorable as the SPD is faced with a double-sided challenge that cannot be met without suffering losses to the one or the other side. Second, German federalism goes hand-in-hand with perpetual state elections, providing incentives for short-term vote-seeking behavior, instead of establishing a sophisticated long-term strategy. Besides, diverse regional branches of the party might find different answers to similar office-seeking questions due to differing Land contexts, and a party organization at the Land level does not always obey the national party leadership. Such fragmentation is clearly at odds with the needs of centralized strategy formulation.

Considering all these constraints, the SPD's prospects for the federal election in September 2009 are not very positive. Nevertheless, the current financial and economic crisis might distract public attention from the SPD's internal quarrels. Instead, questions regarding how to deal with an insolvent banking system and how to cope with the recession will be major topics in the election campaign. Theoretically, the SPD could take advantage of these issues, as the request to re-regulate financial markets and to implement state-driven economic stimulus packages is usually more in line with social democratic than with conservative or liberal economic policies. Yet, opinion polls indicate the opposite. Only 15 percent of German voters believe that the SPD will do the best job in boosting the economy (CDU/CSU: 53 percent), and only 17 percent are satisfied with the SPD in terms of managing the financial crisis (CDU/CSU: 44 percent).³⁵ Given these facts and the overall opinion poll results (see Figure 1), the SPD might be satisfied with a continuation of the grand coalition. Its leading personnel—party leader Münterfering and the party's most prominent cabinet ministers Steinmeier and Steinbrück—tend to prefer this scenario, at least behind the scenes. In contrast, the "official" aim to build a coalition government with the FDP and Greens seems to be less likely, let alone a SPD/Left Party/Green alliance, given the fact that these two scenarios are rejected by an overwhelming majority of Germans.³⁶ If the Social Democrats will be thrown back into opposition, however, it might be assumed that the left wing will gain powerful positions within the party and thus

succeed in eventually envisaging a coalition with the Left Party at the federal level. In that case, even a merger between both parties might become possible in the (very) long run.

CHRISTOPH EGLE is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. He received his PhD from the University of Heidelberg in 2007. His main research interests are comparative public policy, political parties, and German and French politics.

Notes

1. The author is grateful to Ingolfur Blühdorn, Reimut Zohlnhöfer, Paul Serzel, and two anonymous reviewers for critical comments on an earlier version of this article. The usual disclaimer applies.
2. See Christoph Egle, "Le Parti social-démocrate allemand entre crise et nouveau départ" *Note du Cerfa No 49* (2007), available at www.ifri.org/files/Cerfa/NDc_49.pdf; Thomas Meyer, "Die blockierte Partei—Regierungspraxis und Programmdiskussion der SPD 2002-2005," in *Ende des rot-grünen Projektes. Eine Bilanz der Regierung Schröder 2002-2005*, eds., C. Egle and R. Zohlnhöfer (Wiesbaden, 2007), 83-97; Oskar Niedermayer, "Lag es nur an der Agenda 2010? Zu den Problemen der SPD vor der Bundestagswahl 2005," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Deutsches und Europäisches Parteienrecht und Parteienforschung* 13 (2006): 44-59.
3. See Wolfgang Merkel, Alexander Petring, Christian Henkes and Christoph Egle, *Social Democracy in Power. The Capacity to Reform* (London, 2008), 96.
4. See Oliver Nachwey and Tim Spier, "Political Opportunity Structures and the Success of the German Left Party in 2005," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 2 (2007): 123-154 and the contribution by Dan Hough and Christian Koß in this issue.
5. Viola Neu, "Analyse der Bundestagswahl 2005" *KAS-Archivpubliken Nr. 157/2006* (Sankt Augustin/Berlin, 2006), 18.
6. Oskar Niedermayer, "Das Parteiensystem Deutschlands," in *Die Parteiensysteme Westeuropas*, eds., O. Niedermayer, R. Stöss and M. Haas (Wiesbaden, 2006), 109-133, here 130.
7. Joachim Raschke, "Politische Strategie. Überlegungen zu einem politischen und politischen Konzept," in *Jensitis des Regierungalltags. Strategiefähigkeit politischer Parteien*, eds., F. Nullmeier and T. Saretzki (Frankfurt/Main, 2002), 207-241, here 210; for a more comprehensive approach towards political strategy-making see Joachim Raschke and Ralf Tils, *Politische Strategie. Eine Grundlegung* (Wiesbaden, 2007).
8. Kaare Strøm, "A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties," *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 2 (1990): 565-598.
9. See Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda, "An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6, no. 3 (1994): 259-287.
10. Raschke (see note 7), 215.

11. See Wolfgang C. Müller and Kaare Strøm, eds., *Policy, Office, or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions* (Cambridge, 1999).
12. Oskar Latouane, *Das Herz schlägt links* (Munich, 1999), 98ff.
13. See Reinut Zohlnhöfer, "Destination anywhere? The German red-green government's inconclusive search for a third way in economic policy," *German Politics* 13, no. 1 (2004): 106-131.
14. Egle (see note 2), 2-3.
15. See Reinut Zohlnhöfer and Christoph Egle, "Einleitung: Der Episode zweiter Teil—ein Überblick über die 15. Legislaturperiode," in Egle and Zohlnhöfer (see note 2), 11-25, here 21.
16. "Am liebsten mit Schröder", Interview with Franz Müntefering, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* 21 August 2005, 4.
17. Christoph Egle and Christian Henkes, "Between Tradition and New Revisionism—The Programmatic Debate in the SPD," in *Reshaping Social Democracy, Labour and the SPD in the New Century*, eds., S. Haseler and H. Meyer (London, 2004), 119-142, here 125ff.
18. Meyer (see note 2).
19. *Ibid.*, 91.
20. See John Leslie, "Party Institutions, the SPD and the Fall of Franz Müntefering," *German Politics & Society* 25, no. 1 (2007): 1-27.
21. Cited in Jürgen Leinemann, "Ohne Maß und Mitte," *Der Spiegel* 7 November 2005: 40-45, here 41.
22. *Spiegel online*, 2. November 2005; <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,382810,00.html>.
23. "Nichts kommt von selbst," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 November 2005, 3.
24. ARD Deutschlandtrend Januar 2006, available at: <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/?id=39&aid=133>.
25. See Matthias Platzeck, "Ein besserer Sozialstaat," *Der Spiegel*, 10 April 2006: 34-35 and Matthias Platzeck, "Das Leitbild des Vorsorgenden Sozialstaats," in *Soziale Demokratie im 21. Jahrhundert. Lesebuch zur Programmdebatte der SPD*, eds., K. Beck and H. Heil (Berlin, 2007), 228-232.
26. In spite of these health reasons, Platzeck nevertheless remained in his office as Minister President of Brandenburg, suggesting that governing a federal state is less demanding than leading an internally divided party like the Social Democrats.
27. See their statement that "[t]he foreful policies of the Schröder administration were a sound beginning. It led us Social Democrats back to being at eye level with reality," Matthias Platzeck, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and Peer Steinbrück, "Die Mehrheit der Gesellschaft will soziale Demokratie," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 August 2007, 5.
28. See SPD, "Die Mitgliederbefragung zum 'Bremer Entwurf' für ein neues Grundgesetzprogramm," *SPD-Prägheitsberichte* Nr. 2/2007, 26.
29. "Fassungslosigkeit in der SPD über Kurt Beck," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 February 2008, 1.
30. The effort of Hessian party leader Andrea Ypsilanti of being elected Minister President of Hesse—with the tacit consent of the Left Party, but without forming a coalition—failed, as one social democratic representative refused to support this attempt that had explicitly been counted out by Ypsilanti during the election campaign.
31. "Horst Köhler zum Bundespräsidenten gewählt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 May 2004, 1.
32. ARD Deutschlandtrend Juni 2008; available at: <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/?id=39&aid=164>.
33. "Ein Spaziergang in Ferch und seine Folgen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 September 2008, 3.
34. After Müntefering's wife had died in July 2008, he announced his comeback on the political stage after the summer vacation.

35. See ARD Deutschlandtrend Dezember 2008; available at <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/?id=39&aid=172>.
36. Instead, almost 50 percent of Germans prefer a conservative-liberal coalition, versus only 40 percent a continuation of the grand coalition. See *ibid.*