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A Boring Election Campaign? (September 9, 2009)

The agenda for “Super Election Year 2009” included, in addition to elections to the European Parliament, six *Landtag* elections, eight local elections, one presidential election (carried out by a Federal Assembly), and German Bundestag elections. The head of the Institute for Demoscopy in Allensbach explains why the 2009 Bundestag elections differed from previous ones.

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### **Allensbach Analysis: Campaign without Passion**

*What’s missing is a hot-button issue, the fateful moment, the confrontation between implacable opponents, a stirring vision for the future. The majority of citizens, too, feel that the campaign is flat out dull.*

Rarely has a campaign provoked as much criticism as this one. Boring, devoid of content, averse to conflict, and passionless – these are the most frequently heard rebukes. A sense of chagrin seems to inform many commentaries, as though the parties – needlessly and incomprehensibly – have failed to deliver to the media and to citizens the excitement that should naturally accompany every struggle for power.

The majority of citizens, too, feel that this campaign is flat out dull, only 14% perceive it as a tough contest. Forty-nine percent of the population sees the campaign as boring and devoid of content. In the lead-up to the Bundestag elections of 2002, when this reproach was also heard, only 37% considered it justified, while 38% thought it unjustified.

### **“In the Sleeping Car to Power”**

Generally speaking, excitement and a sense of being challenged cannot be artificially introduced into elections by campaign committees, spin doctors, and advertising agencies. Campaigns are built upon a specific political, economic, and social starting position, which is new in every election and imbued with excitement in very different ways. In 1998, after sixteen years of uninterrupted CDU rule, excitement stemmed from the expectation of a change of government and the formation of a new political constellation, whose very slogan, “the Red-Green experiment,” exuded an aura of adventure; at the same time, the key slogan of the SPD

campaign, the “Justice Gap,” addressed the population’s fear of reforms to the social welfare state.

At first, the 2002 campaign was entirely dominated by concerns about steadily rising unemployment; however, the outbreak of the Iraq War prompted a complete thematic switch in the final weeks, and the election became a referendum on German support for the American advance. The 2005 election was dramatic in many respects: thanks to the premature resignation of the Red-Green government, the population’s deep dissatisfaction with the state of the economy and the reform course, and the constellation of personalities – more precisely, the duel between Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel. At the time, it didn’t occur to anyone to accuse the Union parties of wanting to “come to power in the sleeping car.” With the announcement of tax hikes and an acceleration of the reform course, the CDU and CSU outbid the SPD, and this bold move won them much recognition in the campaign – and a pay-off from voters.

### **An Election in the Shadow of the Crisis**

In past Bundestag elections, excitement arose primarily from exceptional situations (as, for instance, in the case of the first all-German elections), from a crisis-like intensification of the economic or political situation, from a duel of personalities with an open-ended outcome, and from the population’s fear of infringements upon their material interests and security guarantees. There were also electoral campaigns in which social blueprints were passionately contested, but that’s already more than thirty years in the past and thus ancient history for today’s young voters.

To discover what is shaping the 2009 campaign we must first look to the economic and financial market crisis. As late as the spring, it seemed as though this election would occur in the shadow of the crisis. Now, too, in the view of the majority, the election is chiefly about our chances of pulling out of the crisis as quickly as possible. Only with the intensification of the crisis did a Black-Yellow majority emerge in the polls at the beginning of the year. Over the last few weeks, two-thirds of the population have discussed the crisis, more so than any other topic. And yet, crisis-related fears are having less of an impact on the starting point of the election campaign. The economic pessimism of the population has eased dramatically over the last few weeks. Whereas 55% of citizens were still expecting unfavorable economic developments in May, that number now stands at only 30%.

### **At Most a New Coalition Partner**

Unlike in 2005, fears that a certain political coalition could threaten one’s own interests barely played a role in this election. To be sure, the vast majority of voters expect little good to come of the next legislative session, given the high level of national debt; however, the “threat potential” is not exclusively assigned to one party, as was the case in 2005, when nearly 40% of voters

feared that they would suffer personal disadvantages from a government takeover by the CDU/CSU.

The prospect of a possible change in government isn't providing much excitement this time around either. Two-thirds of the population expect Angela Merkel to remain chancellor; just under half see her as the head of a Black-Yellow coalition in the coming legislative session, 16 percent see her as the chancellor of another Grand Coalition. Accordingly, the vast majority expects at most a new coalition partner. This prospect creates excitement only within one electoral group, which is mobilizing to a very unusual extent, namely supporters of the FDP.

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### **The “Pleasure in the Battle of Opinions”**

To be sure, even after four years of the Grand Coalition, citizens associate the CDU/CSU and the SPD with radically different political goals and programs. But at least since the Red-Green coalition made its decisions on Agenda 2010, citizens realize that there is, and must be, a significant divergence between programmatic goals and decisions made within the context of governing. Leftist parties, which have a stronger ideological identity, are usually damaged more severely by this than the pragmatic bourgeois parties.

However, it is not only the cooperation within the Grand Coalition that is making it nearly impossible to kick off pointed, polarizing debates. Not only politics is pragmatic and sober, the larger society is as well. Polarizing debates have become foreign to the population; if it witnesses such debates, it tends to consume them as a specific form of entertainment, without being affected by them in a lasting and profound way. The “pleasure in the battle of opinions,” which media scholar Emil Dovifat identified as an essential German characteristic, has become less pronounced, especially when it comes to fundamental ideological debates.

### **Only a Few Topics Separate the Supporters of Various Parties**

This limits the prospects of attempts to rekindle the great emotional controversies of previous decades. That holds, for example, for the debate over nuclear power, which was refreshed – as though by coincidence – shortly before the elections via the issue of waste disposal. But the attitude of the large majority has been consistently ambivalent for many years: the decision to abandon nuclear power is supported, but at the same time the majority considers it unrealistic; waste disposal is viewed as an unresolved issue, but at the same time, 94 percent of the population believes that it is important for politics to find a solution. This is not the stuff of passionate societal debate.

And the attempt to link the peace movement of the last century with Afghanistan – or at least with the uproar that was orchestrated before the 2002 Bundestag elections in connection with the Iraq war – is proving less than easy. The population's skepticism toward Bundeswehr

missions in crisis regions is considerable by now, but at the same time the majority supports foreign deployments if they serve to secure peace and, in general, German security interests. Ever since the Red-Green coalition, there is no longer any polarization on these issues between supporters of the CDU, SPD, FDP, and the Greens. In general, there are only a few topics that fundamentally separate supporters of these parties. Only the supporters of the Left Party assume a special role in many respects, especially in their critical basic stance toward the German economic and social order.

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Source: Renate Köcher, "Wahlkampf ohne Leidenschaft" [An Election Campaign without Passion] FAZ.NET, September 9, 2009.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap