

Germany: Bound to Change

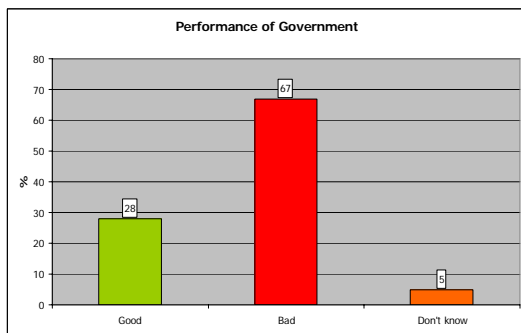
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Germany is bound to change governments when voters hit the election boots in fall. Recent public opinion polls clearly demonstrate voters' intention to change their government. Yet, they are not convinced that a new government will be able to turn things around.

Germans are clearly fed up with the current government.

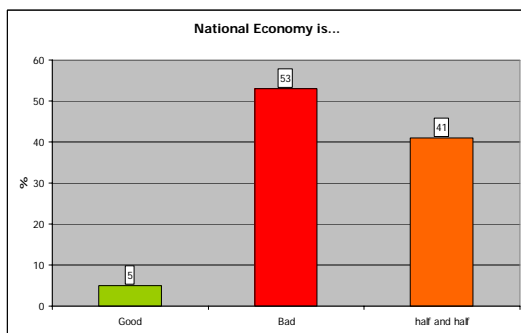
Figure 1



When asked how they rate the performance of the current government an overwhelming 67 percent majority says it is "bad" while only 28 percent give it a "good" rating (Figure 1).

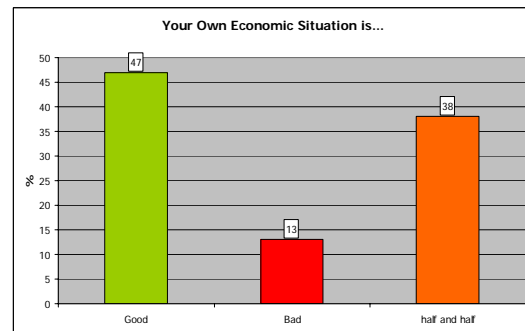
They also believe that Germany's economy is in bad (53%) shape. Only five percent say it is good (Figure 2).

Figure 2



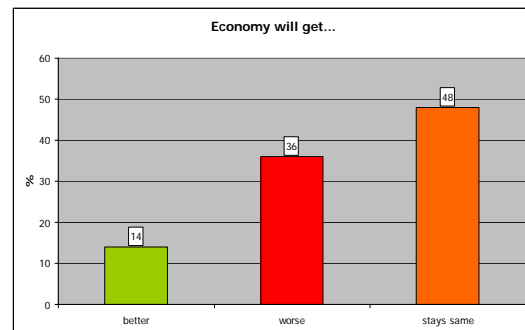
This is much worse than the public's assessment of one's own economic situation. 48 percent think their situation is good while merely 13 percent believe it is bad (Figure 3).

Figure 3



However, the assessment of the personal situation is no reason for comfort and optimism. The overall performance of the economy evokes German *Angst* and people expect the worst.

Figure 4

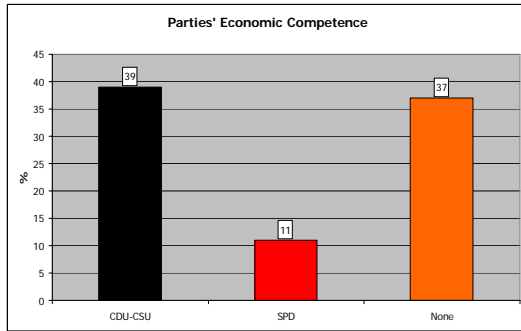


36 percent expect the economy will get worse while only 14 percent hope it will improve. A majority of 48 percent thinks it stays the same (Figure 4).

The public also lost confidence in the economic competence of the Social

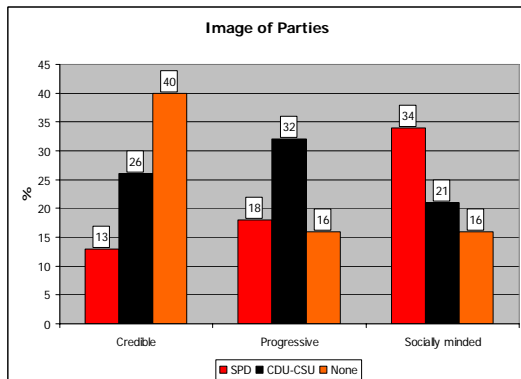
Democratic Party (SPD) that leads the current government.

Figure 5



Only a minority of eleven percent trusts that the SPD can turn the economy around. The main opposition party (CDU-CSU) is perceived as much more competent on economic issues. But many (39%) have lost confidence in *all* political parties' ability to turn the economy around (Figure 5).

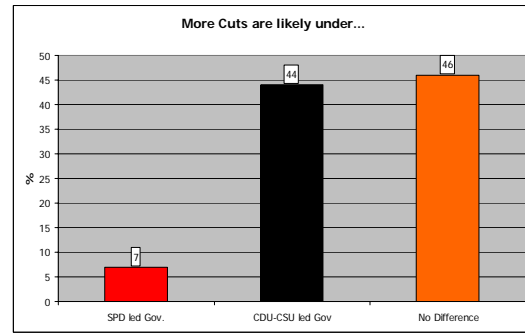
Figure 6



A majority of 40 percent says that no party is credible and can be trusted. However, they give the CDU-CSU higher marks (26%) than the miserable 13 percent for the SPD. The Social Democrats are only considered more socially minded whereas the Christian Democrats are perceived as more progressive (Figure 6).

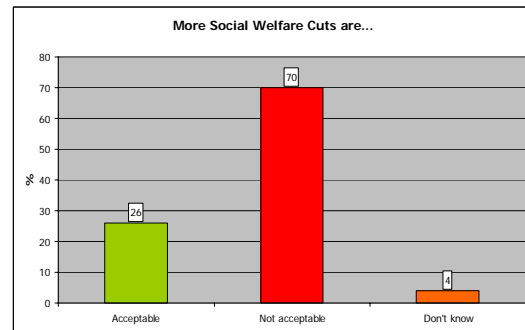
Therefore, voters expect that a CDU-CSU-led government will cut deeper into the social welfare programs (44%) than a SPD-led government (Figure 7).

Figure 7



But an even higher majority of 46 percent anticipates that both parties will have to cut into the social welfare program. This means that the SPD cannot capitalize on its image as the more socially minded party that will avoid big cuts in social spending. The fact that an SPD-led government has disillusioned the voters weighs more than its image as the more socially inclined party.

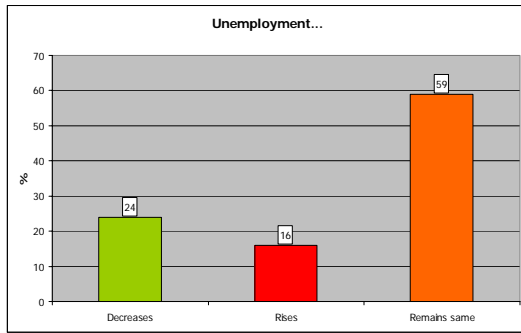
Figure 8



However, make no mistake: Germans find deeper cuts into social welfare programs totally unacceptable (70%). Only 26 percent believe such cuts of social spending is acceptable (Figure 8).

If the economy is not likely to change in the mind of a majority and a CDU-CSU led government is likely to cut social welfare programs do voters expect that a new government can bring unemployment down by creating jobs? Such optimism is fairly limited and premature.

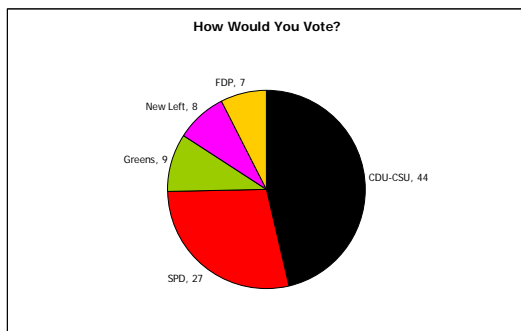
Figure 9



Only 24 percent believe that a CDU-CSU-led government can bring unemployment down while 59 percent expect it to stay the same. However, only 16 percent believe that unemployment will rise even further after the government has changed (Figure 9).

In short, voters have been severely disillusioned with political parties and a majority remains extremely skeptical that any of them can change things for the better. There is only one thing they are even surer: the SPD has proven that it cannot do the job! This means that other parties deserve a chance, even if many Germans doubt that the Christian Democrats will do better.

Figure 10



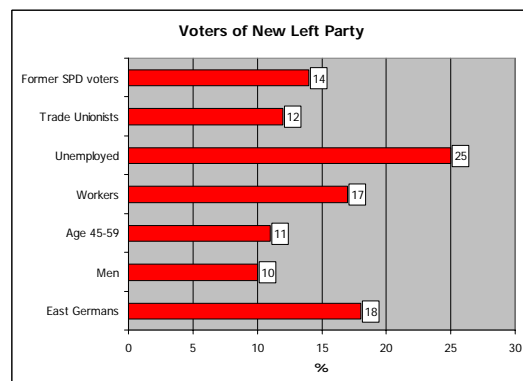
Currently, voters would give a coalition of CDU-CSU and FDP a majority of 51 percent. The current coalition of SPD and Greens would receive only 36 percent and would be removed from power (Figure 10). Even if this big gap between these two possible coalitions

can narrow in the weeks to come and particularly in response to the campaign manifest of the Christian Democrats which has just been published, it is highly unlikely that the current coalition can win the race.

Two interrelated questions remain open: First, what happens if the CDU-CSU and FDP coalitions fail to receive a majority of more than 50 percent of the seats in the German parliament? Second, who is the New Left party and can their potential strength influence the coalition-building process among the others? Some public opinion polls see it actually at about ten to eleven percent. They could become the third strongest party in the German *Bundestag* outracing not only the FDP but also the Greens.

The weakness of the center-left and left wing parties is currently that they are split between three different parties (SPD, Greens, New Left). Chancellor Schröder has already apodictically declared that he is not prepared to form a coalition with the new party on the left.

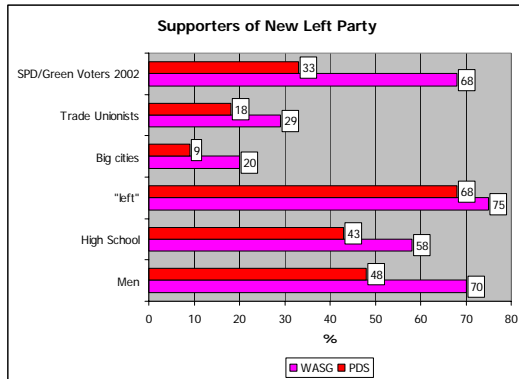
Figure 11



The New Left party which still searches for a proper name combines the old communist party of East Germany with disillusioned former members of the Social Democrats and Trade Unionists who have been hard hit by the poorly

performing economy and the cuts into the social welfare programs. The party is supported by unemployed voters, East Germans, and workers. It also cuts into potential voters of the SPD (Figure 11).

Figure 12



However, the two strands – former East German Communists (PDS) – and disillusioned SPD voters (WASG) - cannot be seamlessly integrated. Their profiles are rather different as Figure 12 shows. While both identify with the “left”, the disillusioned SPD supporters are more likely to be male, better educated, and members of Trade Unions; they also live in big cities. Supporters of the former communist party (PDS) have not voted for the SPD or the Greens as much as the WASG supporters have in the 2002 election. They live in the countryside and have been the losers of the German unification process.

It will be very difficult to integrate these two groups into one political party and manage to keep it cohesive because supporters’ expectations and aspirations are quite different. Their common bond is that they disagree with the other political parties. This makes them a good opposition but an unlikely candidate as coalition partner.

However, if this “New Left” gains enough strength to prevent the CDU-CSU and FDP from forming a coalition

government, the other parties will be hard pressed to build a stable government. A potential solution is a “grand coalition” out of CDU-CSU and SPD provided that the SPD does not become much stronger than today. Another possibility is a CDU-CSU and Green coalition provided that it is the FDP that loses voters rather than the CDU-CSU. In terms of political programs a grand coalition is the most likely second best option.

However, even if the numbers change a little as the election campaign progresses Germany is on the path to a change of government in fall 2005. Yet, Germans remain skeptical whether a new government can solve the economic and employment problems more effectively.

Data Sources:

Forsa für N-TV July 11, 2005-07-14

ZDF Politbarometer June 24, 2005.