

INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1998

**GERMANY / A SPECIAL REPORT****The Tricky Business of Predicting Election Winner**

By Josef Joffe

**M**UNICH — So Gerhard Schröder, the Social Democratic contender, is 14, 18 or even 28 points ahead of Helmut Kohl? So on Sept. 27, he is going to unseat Germany's chancellor-in-perpetuity? Don't bet your bank account yet.

Nothing is trickier than calling an election in Germany. First of all, the huge leads of spring tend to vanish by the fall. During the last German election, in 1994, the Social Democratic candidate

**NEWS ANALYSIS**

Rudolf Scharping also held a double-digit lead over Mr. Kohl early on, and where is Mr. Scharping now?

The second reason for caution is a structural one. Germany's system of proportional representation generates coalitions. (Only once, in 1957, was the government elected by absolute majority, when Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Christian Democratic Union was returned to power.)

So Mr. Schröder will have to stand on the shoulders of a junior coalition partner in order to scale the walls of the

Bundeskanzleramt. And until a few weeks ago, his natural predestined partners seemed to be the Greens. In the polls, they were given 8 percent to 10 percent of the vote, while the Social Democrats were placed in the low 40s.

Even considering that the Greens always do better in the polls than at the polls, these numbers seemed to add up

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to a comfortable majority.

But the Greens are, above all, a party of the true faith, and so you can always count on them to shoot themselves in both feet when power moves within grasping range.

In early March, during their party congress in Magdeburg, the Greens committed a series of dreadful blunders, thus reminding the electorate that they are still fighting yesterday's battles against NATO, the United States, the Bundeswehr (armed forces), peace enforcement and NATO enlargement—in short, against the solid consensus of the country.

Mr. Schröder had only two words to say about his presumed comrades-in-power: "nicht regierungsfähig," or "not fit to govern."

Within days, the Greens plummeted in the polls, from 10 percent to 7 percent, and there is now a serious question whether they will be able to clear the 5 percent hurdle required for representation in Parliament.

Either way, Mr. Schröder may have lost his foreordained coalition partner this spring. Even if the Greens make it back into Parliament, how could this would-be Tony Blair co-govern with a party that isn't merely far to his left, but is in a different ideological orbit altogether?

Right now, the polls give Mr.

Schröder around 42 percent while Mr. Kohl's Christian Democrats get around 36 percent. Both numbers are quite soft because up to one-third of the electorate is basically undecided. More important, don't count out Mr. Kohl yet, even after 16 years at the top.

Think about large animals like bears or rhinos. Though not exactly sleek-looking, they can outrun most other denizens of the forest or savanna once they get going. At least in campaigns past, Mr. Kohl has fought best with his back to the wall. Also, his cards aren't that bad.

During the next months, he will attack Mr. Schröder from two directions. One line of assault will zero in on Mr. Schröder's credibility. Though this Social Democrat tries to be Bill Clinton and Tony Blair wrapped into one, he has not been able to subjugate his left wing in the manner of his two role models. Mr. Schröder isn't even formally in charge of the Social Democratic Party. The chairmanship is held by Oskar Lafontaine, his worst rival and the darling of the left, who will not sit back meekly while Mr. Schröder tries to rope in doubtful voters with his neo-centrist rhetoric.

Simultaneously, Mr. Kohl will attack Mr. Schröder indirectly by tainting him as a prisoner of the Greens. He will continually remind the waverers that Mr. Schröder, no matter how much scorn he may pour on the Greens, can only govern in tandem with them. That should also help to cut into Mr.

Schröder's appeal. So come Sept. 27, neither Mr. Kohl nor Mr. Schröder might emerge from the contest with a coalition that works. Mr. Kohl and his liberal junior partners, the Free Democrats, may not have the numbers, and Mr. Schröder may not want to rule with the Greens.

Logically, this leads to a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. Who will run it? The party with the largest take, of course. But don't bet too much on Mr. Schröder's Social Democrats. Though lagging behind, the Kohlistas may still edge out the Schröderites, especially if the unemployment rate, at 12.1 percent last month, begins to drop this summer.

In this case, Mr. Kohl might end up with a fifth win, an unprecedented outcome in the annals of democratic politics. Again, don't hold your breath. For the biggest joker in the pack is impossible to quantify.

It is the "boredom factor" or the "we've-had-it syndrome." Remember what happened to the Tories in 1997? Though the economy was booming, though Britain faced no crisis at home or abroad, the new faces won above all because the old ones had been around forever — for 18 years, to be precise. Mr. Kohl has logged in 16. His worst enemy is not Schröder but sheer perpetuity in power.

*JOSEF JOFFE is editorial page editor of the Süddeutsche Zeitung in Munich.*