

## The German Elections:

# Kohl Won—But the Playing Field Changed

*By Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann*

A year before this October's German federal election, drawing parallels between the German contest and the 1992 US presidential race became fashionable. In both, a candidate from the younger generation challenged an older incumbent—Bill Clinton vs. George Bush in the US, Rudolf Scharping vs. Helmut Kohl in Germany. Furthermore, jobs and the economy generally were the top concern in both America and Germany. The end electoral results, however, were very different.

The October 16 Federal balloting capped a super election year in Germany—with a total of 20 elections on the municipal, state, federal and European levels between December 1993 and October 1994. It was precisely this staggering number that made the big concluding contest one of the most exciting Germany has experienced in past decades. Never before has such an extreme and far-reaching change in mood been measured in such a brief period of time. And never before did Germany have a situation in which, for six weeks straight, the Allensbach Institute and other polling organizations such as Emnid, the Mannheimer Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Infas, etc., measured a difference of only about one percent between the two main political camps, with one alternately taking the lead and then falling behind. On Election Sunday, the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*—most German dailies don't have Sunday editions—published the polls' final forecasts. Three institutes predicted that the government coalition—comprising the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP)—would emerge in a dead heat with the opposition. The latter is made up of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the old East German communist party. One poll predicted an opposition

victory. The other two polling institutes, including Allensbach, predicted a narrow lead for the government coalition. Out of the total of its eleven pre-election forecasts since 1957, this was one of Allensbach's most precise. The greatest deviation—share forecast versus share of actual vote—for one of the five parties represented in the Bundestag was 0.9 percent; the average deviation was 0.5 percent.

### **Why the German Outcome was Different from the American**

One big difference between the 1992 US presidential election and the 1994 German federal election involved the fact that the economic upswing which began in America in mid-1991 really wasn't perceived during the campaign by most American voters.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, German voters were very much aware of the trend toward recovery in their country. Against the backdrop of the extreme feeling of despondency that had prevailed in Germany since spring 1992—a mood revealed by many questions used in survey research—the sense of relief that took hold in spring 1994, as voters perceived that the recession was finally over, led to an almost euphoric mood (see figure 1). The first obvious manifestation of the new mood was the outcome of the European elections held on June 12, 1994. After trailing the Social Democrats for two and a half years, the Christian Democrats suddenly pulled ahead.

### **The Importance of Being Helmut**

Still, the economic upswing was by no means the only factor helping the government coalition win a narrow victory in the October election. One almost forgets how hopelessly low the Christian Democrats and Chancellor Kohl had sunk in the eyes of the voters in early 1994. Election analysis shows that the change in mood in Germany

wasn't triggered by the release of the first economic improvement data. Rather, the first shift was initiated by Kohl himself through his unbroken, contagious optimism.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in findings of the Allensbach Institute. The turning point was the CDU convention in Hamburg, February 20-23, at which the chancellor delivered a widely applauded speech.

This sequence of events—first optimism on the part of the chancellor and then data showing economic recovery—once again confirmed Kohl's unique ability to sense change. He operates in the political future while others are still in the past. The optimism he displayed in February was contagious because it anticipated an actual future economic upswing.

To understand Kohl's significance in German politics, one needs to look at the last three federal elections together, not just the October 1994 contest alone. Going into the 1987 contest, Kohl trailed the SPD's Johannes Rau as the candidate preferred for chancellor. In the campaign's last six months, however, he opened a substantial lead over his challenger. It was exactly the same in 1990, when Kohl came from behind in preference for chancellor to open a large margin over the SPD's Oscar Lafontaine down the stretch.

And this year, as Americans like to say, it was "déjà vu all over again." Kohl trailed the latest SPD hopeful, Rudolf Scharping, by 10 points or so in the preference ratings from January through March. Then, he overtook the challenger in the spring and maintained a 10-12 point preference margin in the last months before the balloting (see figure 2).

This year Kohl made himself the absolute center of the CDU/CSU campaign, taking part in more than 100 election ral-

lies, and appearing in television programs centering largely on him. He was aided by the SPD's choice of candidate.

In the summer of 1993, party members were for the first time charged with choosing the new party chairman themselves—in line with the plebiscitary tendencies that had rubbed off on West Germany from the East Germany experience. Two candidates from the left wing of the party faced only one from the more right-leaning wing—Rudolf Scharping, the premier of Rhineland-Palatinate—and as a result Scharping won with only 40% of the members' votes. If a run-off had followed with only two candidates, Gerhard Schröder, the premier of Lower Saxony, would almost certainly have won. Scharping lacked enthusiastic support. Eight weeks before the election, the attempt to present him as a hero of the younger generation had to be abandoned. The campaign switched to depicting a triumvirate: Scharping, Oskar Lafontaine, the 1990 SPD candidate for chancellor, and Gerhard Schröder.

Then slowly, through furious efforts by grass-roots election campaigners, the SPD began to recover over the last few weeks. It worked its way up within a whisker of victory. But the victory that had seemed so certain for the party in the winter of 1993/94 had been lost.

### The New Left Alliance

The state election in the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt on June 26, 1994 gave SPD strategists an opportunity

to devise a new approach in expanding the left camp—which had consisted primarily of the SPD and the Greens. The new gambit involved not aligning with but “tolerating” the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), the successor to the old communist organization. Up to that point, the parties had adhered to the idea that there was to be no political cooperation with extremists, whether they be on the left or the right.

Now, however, there was the “Saxony-Anhalt model,” which led to a rift among the SPD's own supporters. Scharping declared that after the federal election he would not enter into any agreements with the PDS with regard to forming a government coalition. Yet Gerhard Schröder avoided making any such commitment.

In the end, the federal election resulted in a slight majority for the ruling government coalition, making moot, for the time being, the question of cooperating with the PDS in Bonn. And yet the “Saxony-Anhalt model” changed the entire political landscape in Germany. Now, the political differences between eastern and western Germany have broken out in full view. In the western states, the majority of the population gives priority to democratic consensus—no cooperation with the successor to the communist party. In eastern Germany, however, the majority of the population feels that the PDS is not responsible for the former communist system and is a legitimate democratic party which could be included in a federal coalition. So far there hasn't been broad public discussion of the political attitudes of eastern and western

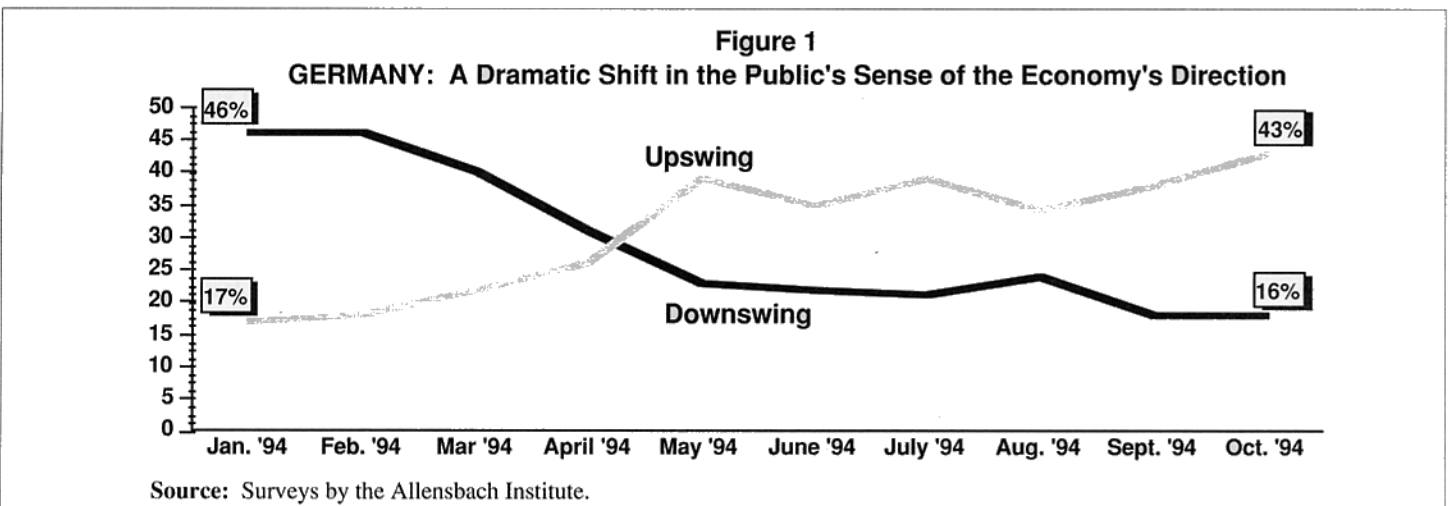
Germans toward the issue of what is democratic and what is extremist.

Such a discussion will be unavoidable, though. Based on the lessons learned from the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933, the German Basic Law of 1949 requires that parties must win at least five percent of the total vote to gain any seats in parliament. This was intended to ensure that the democratic process not be paralyzed by numerous smaller parties. But there is one exception to the rule. Parties whose candidates succeed in winning a majority in at least three electoral districts don't have to pass the 5% hurdle. The PDS obtained only 4.4% of the party vote across Germany, but it won in four constituencies. It thus qualified under proportional representation and will have 30 seats in the 13th Bundestag.

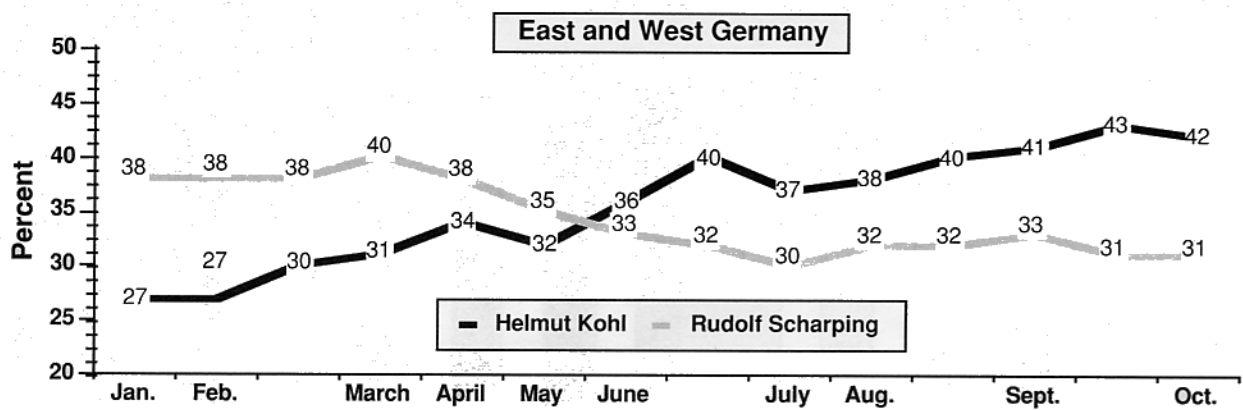
The PDS is, by the way, an unusual amalgam. It is on the far left ideologically, but it's hardly a “workers party.” Its core supporters are drawn from the old ruling class of the former East German regime. These people rank relatively high in such socioeconomic status measures as education and income. Along with members of this old elite, the PDS draws support from a mix of people who like its emphasis on East German identity and interests.

### Another Polling Flap

All political analysts agreed that the question of whether the Free Democrats (FDP) would get the 5% total they needed for representation would be absolutely criti-



**Figure 2**  
**THE 1994 FEDERAL ELECTION: Whom Do You Favor for Chancellor?**



Source: Allensbach Archives, IFD-Surveys, 1994.

cal to the election's outcome—since this party, unlike the PDS, would not qualify for seats under the “three-constituency victories” rule. Polls by most research institutes showed the FDP well above the 5% mark, generally in the 7-9% range. But one polling firm, Forsa, announced three weeks prior to the election that only 4% of the population still intended to vote FDP. Forsa's director said on a popular TV program that those voting for the Free Democrats would likely be throwing their votes away. This 4% projection was played up in

the German media. Five leading polling organizations distanced themselves from it, though, decrying any attempt to manipulate the election through opinion research.

The “wasted vote” gambit, supposedly buttressed by poll findings, failed in the end. The fact that most polls showed the FDP over 5% was perhaps decisive. But feelings generated by the polling controversy ran high. After all, if the Free Democrats had not made the 5% cut-off, Rudolf

Scharping would probably be chancellor of Germany.

**Endnotes:**

- 1 Everett C. Ladd, “The 1992 US National Election,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 1-21.
- 2 See, for example, Kurt Reumann, “Kohls Optimismus steckt die Wähler an—er ist seine stärkste Waffe,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (October 18, 1994), p.3.

*Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann is director, Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach*

# What Part Did the Media Play?

*By Wolfgang Donsbach*

Some people still question whether the mass media influence elections or not. It's evident that they do. One survey result attests to this: When asked how they get their most important guidance in deciding how to vote, over 80% of the German public mention one or more of the news media, with half mentioning television in particular. Second-hand experience and borrowed opinions become more and more crucial in societies where the public has to make up its mind about an increasing number of complex issues and regarding political leaders with whom it has less and less direct contact.

What was the thrust of the German news media in the 1994 Bundestag election on

October 16? There are four lessons to be learned: (1) the partisan press system prevailed; (2) the challenger, Rudolf Scharping, lost the election, in part, because his supporters in the media endorsed him only halfheartedly; (3) negativism dominated political coverage; and (4) the media battle about the fate of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) was the most crucial element in this campaign.

**The German *Medien Monitor***

For the first time in a German election we are able to rely on empirical data—in this instance, provided by the German *Medien Monitor*. Inspired by the US *Media*

*Monitor*, a group of scholars, business people, and other public figures founded an association for media content analysis in late 1993. Published twice a month, the *Medien Monitor* contains the results of quantitative content analyses of some 15 German news media of national significance. The coding covers several regular subjects (news coverage of the leading political figures and parties, the state of the economy, the main issues in the news), and, in addition, includes various topical issues popping up in the media and selected every two weeks by the research committee.

The news media on which the *Medien Monitor's* analyses are based have been