

Beck to basics

Coverage of the SPD chairman, 04/06 - 05/07

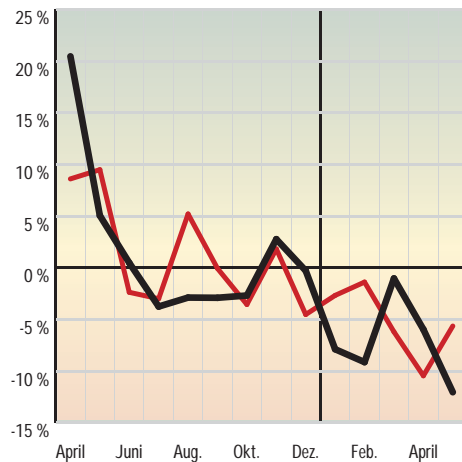


Kurt Beck 2006/2007



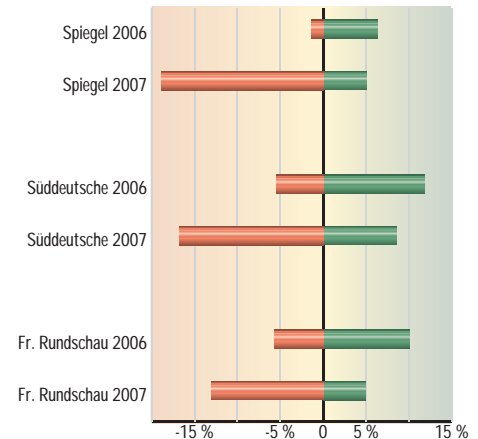
Angela Merkel 2000/2001

1) Balance of assessments of Beck (2006 - 2007) and Merkel (2000 - 2001)



Basis: A total of 26,211 statements by or about Merkel in 15 media outlets and 27,914 statements by or about Beck in 24 media outlets
Time period: 04/2000 - 05/2001 and 04/2006 - 05/2007

2) Assessment of Beck in selected media



Basis: A total of 3,112 statements by or about Beck in these media outlets
100%: all statements by or about Beck (remainder of 100%: no clear rating)
Time period: 05 - 06/2006 and 03 - 05/2007

The opinion leading Media have written off Kurt Beck: The SPD chairman – who started in 2006 as the hope for the future and potential chancellor candidate – is under pressure. In media coverage so far, he has not been able to score points with economic or socio-political topics. Most left-leaning media, above all the Spiegel, severely challenge Beck. But Beck continues to have one opportunity: No one else has emerged as a serious alternative for SPD chancellor-candidate. The media image of other Social Democrats that are covered to a significant extent – such as Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier or Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel – has not been convincing in the first half of 2007.

The Minister President of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck, resigned for health reasons. Kurt Beck, a former state (Landes-) politician, got the job. His challenge consists of positioning the party in such a way that it proves both able to govern and is seen as responsible. He not only has to maintain its political profile but also to set it apart from the newly formed party to the left of the spectrum, die Linke.

Now the SPD chairman has to assert himself in the media democracy. So far he has seen little success. As political coverage is focused on the capital Berlin, Beck fell behind in media presence. The media's attention has only been increasing since the spring of this year, mainly through reinforced criticism.

The left-wing media, in particular, were hard on

Beck (chart 2). The Spiegel – which tended to assess Beck rather cautiously when he took up office – positioned itself critically, even comparing him with the former SPD chairman Rudolf Scharping (2.4.). Just one year in office, Kurt Beck is under pressure. According to Infratest dimap opinion polls in May, almost as many Social Democrats interviewed would vote for Angela Merkel (43%) in a hypothetical direct election for the chancellor than for their own candidate (48%).

Beck's praise circle in the SPD is working

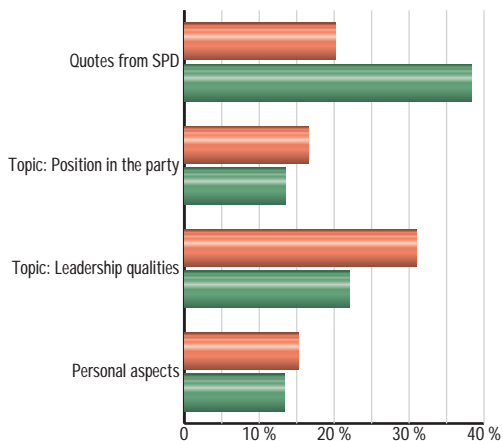
Chart 3 illustrates the media coverage of Beck since the beginning of the year. There has been a slight overhang of negative ratings in 2007 overall. Still, from among the Social Democrats quoted, positive statements predominant. Critics are not showing up with sound bites, yet. This statistic is typically a highly usable indicator for political strength or weakness: When critics from inside the party dare to step in front of journalists' microphones to talk openly,



Research Link

<http://www.infratest-dimap.de>
– hier sind die Deutschland-Trend
Daten einzusehen

3) Assessment of Beck by selected topics/sources



Basis: A total of 10,648 statements by or about Beck in 37 media outlets
100%: all statements by or about Beck (remainder of 100%: no clear rating)
Time period: 01 - 05/2007

the leader's influence and the possibility of sanctions must be dwindling.

Moreover, no other SPD politician has put himself forward to inherit Beck's mantle in the first half of 2007 (**chart 4**): It is true that members of the cabinet like Peer Steinbrück or Frank-Walter Steinmeier were assessed neutrally to slightly positive in the past three months. However, it is questionable whether or not the party would accept them as leaders.

State politicians, who won or could win elections, are the main group that generated positive headlines. Other potential Beck competitors were rated in a rather balanced way, or did not even appear in the list of the most frequently mentioned Social Democrats – such as the current Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit.

Stamina and strategy

Coverage on the SPD chairman in his first year is strongly reminiscent of the case of Angela Merkel (**chart 1**): After she was elected chairperson at the height of the CDU financing scandal in April 2000, her star began to sink: "Angie-Mania" was followed by the "K-Frage" (the question on who would become the chancellor candidate). Merkel benefited from the fact that her party did not have an alternative at the decisive moment – and the same opportunity could present itself to Beck.

For the SPD chairman it is therefore imperative to improve his image in the national media through strategic communication:

1. Define key issues – the SPD chairman must not

4) Assessment of the most frequently mentioned Social Democrats in national news coverage



Basis: A total of 38,274 statements by/about these politicians in 37 media outlets
100%: all statements by or about the person concerned (remainder: no clear rating)
Time period: 01 - 05/2007

be present on too many topics. A strong profile on the most important topics makes one less vulnerable.

2. Occupy topics – even if those topics are not always on the agenda in the fast-paced "Berlin Democracy". Active contacts pay off when the issues reappear.

3. Central communication control – as a governing party, the SPD has the possibility to set the agenda to a certain extent. A central control of the communication is a precondition to conveying one's own topics to party members and voters. (ret)

Basis

Media: Bild, Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Handelsblatt (since 04/2007), Süddeutsche Zeitung, tageszeitung (since 01/2007); Die Zeit (since 01/2007), Focus, Rheinischer Merkur (since 01/2007), Spiegel, Stern, Super Illu; Bild am Sonntag, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, Welt am Sonntag (each since 03/2006); Capital, Manager Magazin (since 01/2007), ARD Tagesschau (20 h), Tagesthemen, ZDF heute (19 h), heute journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben Newstime; Bericht aus Berlin, Berlin direkt (both since 03/2006); ARD Fakt, Kontraste, Monitor, Panorama, Report (BR and SWR), ZDF Frontal 21 (all political programmes since 09/2006), ARD Plusminus und ZDF WISO (both since 01/2006); Deutschlandfunk Nachrichten (7 h – since 02/2006)

Time period: 12/2005 - 05/2007 (For technical reasons some issues were not part of the analysis.)

Analysis: All statements by or about the federal government, German parties and politicians.



Share of negative ratings
Share of positive ratings

Open questions

So far it has remained unclear which of the two coalition partners, under constraint to make compromises, suffered most from an image complex. Has this question been solved for the Christian Union? Approval ratings for the government continue to be high. Will criticism of the SPD taint the image of the governing coalition again? In opinion polls, a hypothetical red-red-green coalition (between SPD, Greens and Linke) is slightly ahead of a black-yellow coalition (CDU, FDP). With which issues will Kurt Beck try to win conservative voters to the SPD and how will he communicate those topics?